



**K. SHIVARAMA KARANTH**

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting of King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.

*Courtesy* : National Museum

Makers of Indian Literature

**K. SHIVARAMA KARANTH**

**C. N. Ramachandran**



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is a privilege to write a monograph on Dr. Shivarama Karanth, the illustrious Novelist-Playwright-Educationist-Environmentalism. Hence, when Shree Agrahara Krishnamurthy invited me to write a monograph on Karanth for Makers of Indian Literature series, I immediately and thankfully accepted the offer. It was only later, when I actually began to write the monograph, that I realised what a challenge it was. For, Karanth's output spanning eight decades was truly prodigious and multi-faceted; his works in different genres total 417. Also, there is a considerable body of critical material (in Kannada) on Karanth. My problem was one of selection and focus. I decided to focus on Karanth the novelist, and I hope Karanth-scholars agree with me that, primarily, Karanth is a great novelist. However, I would like add, I have not completely ignored Karanth's achievements in other fields.

Many scholars and friends have helped me in this difficult task. In particular : Dr. B. A. Viveka Rai, Prof. of Kannada, Mangalore University, made available to me most of the works of and on Karanth from 'Karantha Peetha.' He also was of much help to me in understanding Karanth - the man and writer. Ms. Malini Malliya, who has compiled an authoritative bibliography on Karanth and who has edited many works of Karanth has kindly permitted me to make use of her bibliography and to quote from Karanth's works. My friend, Dr. Lakshminarayana Bhat, has been very helpful to me throughout this project. Dr. Na. Damodara Shetty of

'Prasadhan Computers' and Ms. Pushpa are responsible for the excellent DTP work. I sincerely thank all these people.

I am indebted to the great artist, Dr K.K. Hebbar for his invaluable drawing of Dr. Karanth.

All the English translations from Karanth's Kannada works, used in this Monograph, are mine. I have made use of the insights and comments of many Kannada critics on Karanth. Due to the paucity of space, I have not been able to include a bibliography of works/articles on Karanth.

I shall consider my efforts amply rewarded if the readers feel that this Monograph enables them to understand the great mind and art of Dr. Shivarama Karanth.

Mangalore  
26-3-2001

C. N. Ramachandran





*a full view.*

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

There is a highly imaginative line-drawing of Dr. Shivarama Karanth, drawn by his friend Dr. K.K.Hebbar. The great artist, K.K.Hebbar, gives Karanth in this portrait four faces, five hands, and a well-developed, proportionate body. While one hand of Karanth, standing in a dancer's poise, touches the moon, another hand holds a quill; and there are books held in the other three hands. A long silk scarf is tied tightly round the waist of the dancer, whose legs stand firmly on the ground.

This drawing reveals, as no words can, the indomitable courage, strong determination, and the lofty ideals of one who, during a period of about eight decades, wrote 45 novels, 97 plays, nine encyclopaedias, one dictionary, six travelogues, thirteen critical works on art, eight works on science, two autobiographies the second one in three volumes, 231 tales for children, four short-story collections, two poetry-volumes, and eight volumes of stray articles. In addition to such prodigious output, he was a painter, Yakshagana artist, and an environmentalist. Future generations may rightly find it difficult to believe that one man could do and achieve as much as Shivarama Karanth

did. To use a cliché, Shivarama Karanth was as vast - and rebellious - as the ocean by the side of which he grew. He was rightly called 'Kadala thirada Bhargava' - the Parashurama of the sea-shore. The western coastal area (from Kerala to Mumbai) is legendarily the 'creation of Parashurama' ('Parashurama srishti'); and Shivarama Karanth was an embodiment of the sage Parashurama's creative energy, adamant will, and heightened individuality.

The 'Kota' in the name Kota Shivarama Karanth stands for the place where he was born on October 10, 1902. Kota was then a small village, about eight miles to Kundapur on the west coast of Karnataka. To the west of Kota was the roaring Arabian Sea, and to the east, about thirty miles away, rose the majestic and impregnable ranges of the Western Ghats; and in between the clusters of villages in the Ghats there were thick, evergreen forests. Perhaps for this reason, Kota was almost cut off from the rest of the world; roads and buses came much later. The major community in the village was of 'Smartha' Brahmins - those that worship both Vishnu and Shiva. Most of the people there were poor and owned just one or two acres of land. The major occupation of all was paddy cultivation, and even women and children worked hard in the paddy fields to make a living. There were many small and big tanks here and there in the village, in which men, women, and children bathed and washed their clothes. One such tank, called 'Varuna Thirtha', was a favorite place of Karanth in his childhood. Though kerosene had been recently introduced to the village, normally, people had their supper early and put off the kerosene lamps. Only one small oil-lamp would feebly burn near the gods' idols. All told, it was a traditional, insular, and agricultural village.

As the legend goes, Karanth's ancestors, the Kota Brahmins, are supposed to have been brought to Karnataka by a king called Mayura Varma in the 15th/16th century. It seems their saga is mentioned even in *Sahyadri Khanda*, "which is more myth than history," says Karanth. The Kota (or 'Koota' - which means a 'group' or 'band') Brahmins were highly orthodox and conservative; they believed that only they were 'pure' Brahmins. "Our particular community is unusual from one point of view," notes Karanth in his *Ten Faces of Crazy Mind*, "we do not obey any monastic order. We are not lorded over by any particular monk."\* Most probably, Karanth inherited his rebellious spirit from his ancestors; and he retained this spirit throughout his life.

Karanth's father was one Shesha Karanth who inherited from his father only a tiny strip of land. His father (that is, Karanth's grand father), tired of his poverty, had abandoned the family and gone away, never to return. In fact, it was his mother that brought up her children and grandchildren. For a considerable period of his life Shesha Karanth had to struggle hard to eke out a living; and he worked as a lowly-paid teacher for some time and later as an accountant to a rich man. Sometime during the middle of his life, he set up a small cloth-store of his own. As luck would have it, the business proved successful and Shesha Karanth could buy some land and live comfortably. At one time, he maintained even a horse-carriage, which was a luxury few could afford then. He was a man of wide experience, and had considerable knowledge of law (though he did not have any formal education) and native medicines also. He had deep love for Kannada poetry,

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\* tr. H. Y. Sharada Prasad. Bombay : Bharatiya Vidyabhavan, 1993, p.3. Henceforth, referred to as *Ten*.

and, during the rainy season, he would gather the neighbourhood around him and recite as well as explicate Sanskrit and Kannada Ramayanas. Occasionally, he wrote plays also and got them enacted by school children.

Karant's mother was Lakshmi; and Karant writes adoringly of his mother that she really brought 'Lakshmi' (goddess of wealth) to his house. She was a simple woman, of a quiet temper and strong faith. Physically she was weak and the household chores of the big family (of eight members, with no maids to help her) made her weaker. She gave birth to twelve children and Karant says : "Whenever I think of her I have a feeling that it was the twelve childbirths that wore her out" (*Ten*, p.4). As her second son, K.L. Karant, remarks, women in those days used to be treated shabbily. Like beasts of burden, they had to work hard at home as well as outside in the paddy fields, and look after children and guests. They were never consulted or considered when important decisions in the family were taken. For any petty needs of theirs, they had to plead with their husbands employing their children as emissaries.\* Karant's great respect for women, in his life as well as in his novels, must have been an intense reaction to the treatment of women by his community.

Shivarama Karant was the fifth son among the nine sons and three daughters that were born to his parents. One of Karant's elder brothers died in his infancy. His eldest brother was K.Ramakrishna Karant who was a famous advocate, freedom fighter and a politician. He was a minor writer also. His second elder brother was K.Lakshminarayana Karant, who,

\* "Andina Aa Kota," in *Karant's Prapancha*, ed. K.S. Haridas Bhat., Mysore : Geetha Book House, 1969), p. 50. Henceforth, referred to as *Karant's Prapancha*.

for the most part of his life, was the Head Master of the local High School. He is a noted writer on science, and his book, *Janatha Khagolashastra* ('Astronomy for the people') was given an award by the then Madras government. His third elder brother, K. Vasudeva Karanth, was an engineer and also a writer. Similarly, his younger brothers also were engineers or lawyers, and writers.

In those days (in the first two decades of the last century), education was still traditional, and English education was but slowly entering Indian villages and towns. Very few families in Kota sent their children to government schools, and one of them was Karanth's family. When Karanth was admitted to the government school, it did not have a building of its own; and pupils had to sit inside an old Shiva temple, in the company of wild ducks and cats. Karanth must have been highly individualistic even as a child as is borne out by the following incident. It seems, as soon as he entered the school he sat in the teacher's chair, and only the use of force by his teacher could make him sit along with other boys. Social behaviour then was dictated strictly on caste-lines. The 'upper-caste' boys like Karanth could not sit with or touch 'lower-caste' boys; and if by chance they did, they had to go through purification rites.

Karanth grew up on Yakshagana (a kind of dance-music-drama) and poetry recitals. Whenever his father read Kannada classics and explicated them effectively, Karanth would sit among the audience totally absorbed. As he himself recalls, he would sit up all through the night in order to see the colourful roles of demons and other supernatural characters of Yakshagana, who would come up on the stage at dawn. Such childhood attraction of Yakshagana was responsible for Karanth's internationally acclaimed innovations in Yakshagana, later in his life.

Karant joined the High School at Kundapur in his tenth year. His elder brothers were college students then. Karant could never put his heart and soul in academic studies. He was more interested in reading tales and books of general interest; and one of the series that he loved to read was the low-priced *Books for the Bairns*. Among his teachers, there was one Shivaramaiah who was very well-read and who had a passion for literature. He instilled in Karant love for Kannada literature and motivated him to read the modern Kannada novels like *Indirabai*, *Vagdevi* and *Madiddunno Maharaya*. During his High School days, Karant read with great pleasure the translated novels of the Bengali writer, Bankimchandra Chatterjee.

There is an incident of his high-school days which Karant recalls in his autobiography with obvious pleasure. It seems the principal of the school was an Anglophile and did not allow his students to use any other language on the campus but English. Those who occasionally slipped into the mother-tongue were punished. The rebellious spirit of Karant could not accept this discipline. Once within the earshot of the principal, he berated his friend loudly : "You silly ass, why are you laughing in Kannada? Laugh in English" (*Ten*, p.18). According to Karant, the message went home and the principal relaxed his rules since then.

Later, Karant joined the government college at Mangalore. He stayed there with his elder brother, who had just begun his law-practice. Even in the college, he spent more of his time in the library than in the classroom. It was at this period that he read most of the works of Tagore and toyed, for some time, with the idea of joining Shantiniketan. As could be expected, he came under the strong influence of Gandhiji and Aryasamaj which was very active in Mangalore then. Karant attended the meetings and lectures of Aryasamaj very regularly for sometime.

Those were the days when the whole nation was undergoing dramatic changes under the leadership of Gandhi and Tilak. Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement was sweeping across India, and every young man and woman was fired with the spirit of nationalism and revolt. Karanth recalls the visit to Mangalore, in September 1921, of Gandhi and the Ali brothers as part of the Khilafat Movement, and the way he was moved by Gandhi's speech. The death of Tilak also caused tremendous anguish among the students. Gradually Karanth began to realise that he could no longer continue his studies passively.

It was on February 10, 1922 that Karanth took the final plunge. He decided to quit college and join the Freedom Movement. During that period, the great Congress leader, Karnad Sadashiva Rao, was in the forefront of the Movement, touring every village and town in Karnataka, establishing Congress Committees, and Charkha Centres, and organising Prohibition meetings. Karanth met him and other leaders to chart out a path for himself. The most important event of that period was the All Karnataka Nationalist Convention held in Mangalore. Karanth, along with thousands of others, worked for its success, though the fiery speeches of most of the local leaders did not impress him much.

As it was expected, Karanth's father was furious when Karanth quit college and joined the Non-cooperation Movement. He had his heart set on his son's getting a law degree and becoming a great advocate. He lectured to his son for hours; made his wife and mother plead with Karanth to change his decision; and finally, on the advice of an astrologer, conducted some special 'pujas' also. But Karanth was adamant in his decision.



The next six to eight years were a period of constant movement, continuous hardship, and deep frustration for Karanth. He chose to settle down in Kundapur and work day and night among people. He had total faith in Gandhian ideals during this period ("I regarded everything as gospel in his *Hind Swaraj*") and plunged whole-heartedly into social work, like relief for the flood-affected people in and near Kundapur, education and re-marriage for child-widows, and rehabilitation of women forced to prostitution either by poverty or by blind superstition. Also, he was constantly on the move from one village to another, organising local Congress-Committees, charkha-centres, and support for prohibition.

But on most occasions he used to have frustrating experiences. Common people, mostly poor and illiterate, would not show much enthusiasm either toward prohibition or toward charkha and khadi. On one occasion, as Karanth recalls, there were just three people to listen to a lecture on the evils of drinking - two speakers and one in the audience. On another occasion, he travelled for two days, crossing rivers and passing through forest, to meet a rich man to get his contribution for Congress Fund. All that he got for his troubles was a ten-rupee note. Added to all these, since he refused to take any help from his father and had no steady income of his own, he had to struggle to make both ends meet. "It was virtual destitution. I hardly spent an anna or two on my food," Karanth recalls in his *Ten Faces* (p.34).

However, there were some advantages also accruing from his unsettled life. During this period he came in close contact with many great leaders like Karnad Sadashiva Rao, Dr. N.S. Hardikar, and R.R. Diwakar. He developed great love and admiration for Sadashiva Rao, who, born rich, sacrificed

everything for the Nationalist Cause and became a pauper. (There is a moving portrait of Sadashiva Rao under the fictitious name of Dayananda Rao in one of Karanth's ambitious novels. *Audaryada Urulalli*.) Also, Karanth's constant travels, often lonely, resulted in his deeper understanding of Man and Nature. "These experiences taught me," says Karanth in his autobiography, "that a river is not lifeless: a forest is not lifeless; even the hills and rocks are not lifeless.... Each aspect of nature has supreme Energy within it; each has a personality of its own.... Aren't I a child of Nature?"\*

It was during this period of hardship and penury that Karanth entered the field of Kannada literature - as a journalist. Compared with the Marathi and Bengali periodicals/magazines, Kannada periodicals were very poor in those days. One day, in 1924, Karanth and his friend, one Devanna Pai, decided to start a new monthly journal in Kannada called *Vasantha*. Karanth was its editor. Immediately Karanth realised that "it is easy to start a journal but not so easy to fill its pages" (*Ten faces*, p.52). He persuaded most of the then- famous writers to contribute stories, poems, and articles for his journal; and he himself wrote and serialised two detective novels ("inspired by Sexton Blake Stories") to fill pages of *Vasantha*. Though it was appreciated by many, financially it was a failure; and after struggling and limping for two years, it had to be discontinued. Despite an attempt to revive it in 1928, it had to be permanently closed in 1930. But, by that time, Karanth's illustrious literary career had been launched.

Strongly infused with the spirit of social reform, during this period, Karanth turned his attention to the Theatre. His first

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\* *Smrithi Pataladinda*, vol. I . Bangalore : Rajalakshmi Prakashana, 1977, p.38. Henceforth, referred to as *Smrithi*.

play *Nishu Mahime* ('The power of Intoxication', a translation of the then-famous Marathi play *Ekach Pyala* by Gadkari) was staged with considerable success. His interest in the theatre made him, due to unexpected circumstances, manage a professional dramatic troupe also for a short period. In fact, his interest in the theatre, in one form or another, continued throughout his life; and he actually wrote 97 skits/plays most of which were staged.\* However, despite such varied activities, on the whole, it was a period of aimless wandering and he had to explore new avenues very quickly.

The next and most important phase of Karanth's life was at Puttur, sixty k.m.s. away from Mangalore. Karanth arrived in Puttur in 1930 and stayed there for more than four decades. He wrote most of his novels and discursive works there, and carried out many innovative experiments in education and Yakshagana there. By the time he left Puttur in 1973 (in his 71st year) he had achieved national and international recognition.

Karanth decided to settle down in Puttur, primarily because of one great man, Molahalli Shivarao. Molahalli Shivarao, a lawyer by profession, was then the president of the Puttur Taluk Board and there were many upper elementary schools under his control. He was a man of very progressive ideas and an ardent lover of art and literature. He came to know of Karanth's educational and theatrical experiments, and was a constant source of help and encouragement to Karanth.

Once Karanth settled down at Puttur, he began social work on an ambitious scale. First, he began to organise 'training camps' for young people interested in social work. He called them 'Shanti

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\* Malini Mallya, *Kinnaraloka*. Bangalore : S.B.S. Publishers, 1995. Henceforth, referred to as *Kinnaraloka*.

shibira' (Peace Camps) and organised them during school-holidays in summer.

During these peace camps, he, along with the trainees, went to villages, studied their conditions, and attempted to educate villagers on various issues. They also dug wells, built latrines, and cleaned the roads. Karanth ran the camps on the model of Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram where he had stayed for a considerable period two years earlier. Hence, discipline in the camps was very rigid and food was bland. No inmate could be idle in the camp. Karanth conducted such annual camps for five to six years. During these days, the second phase of the Nationalist Movement was sweeping through the country, beginning with 'Salt Satyagraha.' But Karanth, disillusioned with active political work, decided that rural reconstruction on the Gandhian ideals was more meaningful than his personal participation in the Freedom Movement.

During this period, he undertook an extensive survey of economic and living conditions of Harijans in the Puttur Taluk. He and his volunteers visited scores of villages and noted down the conditions of extreme hardship and degradation in which Harijans lived. Their dire need was, he noticed, good drinking water. Sadly, even when Karanth and his group attempted to dig separate wells for them, those poor Harijans as they had come to accept their lot through centuries, hardly showed any interest in such ameliorating work. This survey and the close contact with the Harijans paved the way for Karanth's first major and influential Realistic novel *Chomana Dudi* ('Choma's Drum,') in 1936; later, it was made into a film also.

In the early Thirties of the 20th century, Russia, it was reported, had made use of the film-medium very effectively

towards mass-awakening. Motivated by the Russian experiment, Karanth also decided to try his hand in the new visual medium. He borrowed money, studied everything he could lay his hands on cinematography, and produced a film on untouchability, called *Domingo*. But the quality of processing was poor, and the film couldn't be screened. Then he went ahead and built a small studio itself where he could shoot short, educational films. But his next film was destroyed in an accidental fire. It was much later that he could produce a full-length feature film based on his own novel *Kudiyara Kusu* ('The Kudiyas' Baby').

Karanth was deeply concerned with and developed innovative ideas on education - especially children's education. He abhorred the passive, book-oriented education that children were subjected to in schools; he wanted them to freely move around amidst trees, plants, and animals, and develop their creative abilities. Toward this end, initially he organised 'Makkala Koota' (Children's Gathering) in which children freely moved around, danced and sang the lyrics they themselves composed. The first such Gathering was organised in 1930 at Uppinangadi, near a river. Later, Karanth established in Puttur his most ambitious institution in this direction, called 'Baalavana.' It was a new kind of a school, similar to Kindergarten schools, in which book-learning was substituted by varied activities on the part of children. "Every lesson has to be a play for children" - was Karanth's motto. In order to arouse children's interest in nature and animal life, Karanth built a small zoo also near the school. He gathered one or two dedicated teachers to work with him and opened the school in 1934, with a children's hostel and a small toy train.

However, the ideas of Karanth being far ahead of his times and the community around him being very conservative,

'Bala Vana' did not get the enthusiastic response that Karanth expected. Initially, there were six children in the school and in later years also it never went beyond ten. Since Karanth did not have faith in the rigid government curricula, he did not seek government recognition and funds. Consequently, few came forward to submit their wards to Karanth's experiments. "I realised," recalls Karanth later, "that people are suspicious about a school which did not have the official seal of approval" (*Ten*, p.114).

After a few years of hard work and mounting debts, Karanth had to close down his ambitious institution. But he never lost his interest in children's education. He realised at this time that there were no reference works of any kind for children in Kannada, and began to write an Encyclopaedia for Children ("Bala Prapancha") in Kannada, running to some 1800 pages, in three volumes. It was the first encyclopaedia in Kannada and was published in 1936. This was followed by Encyclopaedia of Science ("Vigyana Prapancha") in four volumes (1959, 60, 62, 64), and a series of graded texts for elementary education, called *Oduva Aata* ('The Game of Reading').

It was during these hectic days of idealism, hard work and frustration that Karanth got married. He used to go to a school in Mangalore (Besant Girls School) during the year 1935, to teach the girls there dancing. He would also direct plays for them. As narrated by himself later, the superintendent of the school pointed out a girl among his pupils and asked him if he would think of marrying her. Karanth had noticed the girl who used to take an active part in all extra-curricular activities. Karanth had no objection to marrying her; but he wanted the girl's consent and also her parents' approval. For, Karanth then,

with all his many-sided talents, had no fixed income of his own; and he was burdened with debts incurred in running Bala Vana and getting the voluminous encyclopaedias for children published. Added to all these, there was also the factor of caste, she being a Bunt (a non-Brahmin agricultural and matriarchal caste). But the girl had an independent mind and she decided to marry Karanth. Her name was Leela, the second daughter of K.D. Alva, a well-known businessman. After the untimely death of Leela's mother, Alva had married again; and owing to some business problems in Bombay, had settled recently in Mangalore. Leela, in one of her rare accounts, records the moment she decided to marry Karanth in these words:

(Karanth called all of us to gather hear him quickly, and then began to cut colour-paper to suit the varied roles).....

My eyes observed the movement of his fingers. What speed? What skill! I stood there, completely lost, looking at his hands.....

I thought, if only I could always be near those hands! At that moment, I felt an intense desire to be near those hands..... What I yearned for, for the first time in my life, was to possess those artistic hands of Karanth.\*

Karanth and Leela got married on May 6, 1936, which, incidentally, was the full-moon day on which Buddha had attained his enlightenment. "If nothing else, dancing earned me a wife," said Karanth later. On the very next day of marriage, Karanth and Leela began their married life in Puttur.

As was to be expected, the inter-caste marriage of Karanth and Leela disturbed many orthodox Brahmins (including, initially, Karanth's parents) in and around Udupi, since, in the

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\* As quoted by Girija, *Leela Karantha Nenapina Samputa*, ed. B. Leela Bhat. Puttur : S.K.A. Kendra, 2001, pp.7-8

Thirties, orthodoxy and rigid caste system reigned supreme. Karanth was ridiculed and despised by many; and a few attacked him in person and in print. One reporter of a newspaper was so virulent in his attack that Karanth had to drag him to court for defamation, which suit Karanth won after many years. In fact, no incident, great or small, seems to have occurred in Karanth's life without intense struggle and the accompanying drama.

By no count it was easy for Leela Karanth to take on the role of Karanth's wife. Since she had early education in Marathi, she had to learn Kannada all over again. Added to the financial constraints at home, Karanth would be away, for weeks at a time, when she would be alone at home. Soon after marriage, her father died and her brother had passed away much earlier. "It is possible," says Karanth, "many of her youthful dreams were frustrated. And I, so much older, might not even have given thought to them" (*Ten*, p.187).

But, very soon, Leela Karanth proved herself equal to all the challenges. She learnt Kannada, adjusted her taste to that of her husband, and gave him the total freedom he needed to pursue his interests.

It was our mother who shaped Karanth's life... She was the backbone of all of his endeavours. She was also quite well-read, and she dedicated all of her talents to her husband. She took care of all household responsibilities. I remember now that mother also, like our father, was an atheist; and she used to read and explain Bertrand Russell for us,

writes Ullas Karanth, her second son, after the death of both Karanth and Leela.\*

\* Jayaprakash Mavinakuli, ed. *Karantha Ugantha*, Puttur : Shivarama Karantha Adhyayana Kendra, 1999, p.250. Henceforth, referred to as *Ugantha*.



Leela Karanth was a very talented woman. She knew Marathi, English and Kannada very well; and she wrote a few articles both in Kannada and English. She translated into Kannada the famous Marathi novel, *Pan Lakshyat Kon Ghetto* (But, Does Anybody Care?) by Harinarayana Apte, which was revised by Karanth (who did not know Marathi) and published by Sahitya Academy. She was also a good dancer and took part in most of Karanth's operas. Her friends even now remember her brilliant performances in *Seethapaharana* (as Seetha), *Kisa Gothami* (as Gothami) and *Buddhodaya*\*

Four children were born to the Karanths: Harsha in 1938, followed by Malavika, Ullas, and Kshama. Since Karanth did not believe in rigid parental control and formal schooling, he allowed his children to grow up freely. Ullas recalls the way they were brought up in these words;

Whenever I remember him (Karanth), what comes to my mind are the stories that he used to tell us every night. I was perhaps six or seven years old then. Father had to tell us a story before we went to sleep; and all those stories were the new ones he would concoct then and there. All the characters of those stories used to be animals. Probably, this was the reason why later on I got motivated to read and conduct research about tigers. (*Yuganta* p.249)

Karanth took his children along with him during his morning strolls and encouraged them to ask questions which he would patiently answer.

For the next two decades, Karanth, who depended on writing for his livelihood, had to struggle against great odds. In

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\* *Nenapina Samputa*, pp. 28, 37 etc.

order to augment his meagre income from his novels and plays, he wrote text-books, compiled a Kannada dictionary, and in the Forties, tired of depending on publishers, he set up his own printing press (named after his first son, Harsha) and became his own publisher. But no venture seemed to work for long.

Harsha, after his high school studies, did not show much inclination for college education. Since he wanted to do some business independently, Karanth helped him put up a shop of electrical goods in Puttur. Harsha worked hard in this business for three years. But success eluded him as his trusted worker in the shop cheated him. The shop had to be closed with a huge loss. Both the father and son were highly frustrated and Harsha was sent to Bombay, to stay with a friend of Karanth and learn some new business.

In the early Fifties, Karanth had another stint at active politics. By that time he had become disillusioned with the Congress party and its leaders. Just then, a similarly disillusioned Acharya Kripalani had floated a new party by name Praja Samajavadi Party, and both Karanth and his elder brother Ramakrishna Karanth joined the new party. They contested the elections held in 1952, Karanth for the State legislature and his brother for the Parliament. Both lost the election. Immediately he left for his first European tour.

Travels were an inseparable part of Karanth's life and works. Very few writers in India - and probably in the West - have travelled as widely and as frequently as Karanth. In fact, as he himself explains in his autobiography, the 'wander-lust' was in his very blood. Even before he reached his thirtieth year, he had travelled through most parts of India; and he did so repeatedly during his later life. Also, there is not a single

country, perhaps, in the world that he did not visit some time or another. In his first European tour in 1952, he visited England, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland. Later on, he visited Iran in 1967; Afghanistan and Nepal in 68; the U.S.A. in 72; Italy and Greece in 75; Hongkong, Japan, and other Far-eastern countries in 79; Russia in 87; the Middle East in 88; and Peru, Brazil and other South American countries in 90. England, of course, he visited more than once.

Regarding the extensive travels of Karanth, two points need to be mentioned here. First, on many occasions, Karanth toured India and other countries on his own, on a shoe-string budget. As far as food and accommodation were concerned, his taste was very simple. Secondly, whenever he visited a famous city or town, he would go to see and study important places of sculpture, architecture, and painting. Museums and libraries were his favourite places, where he spent most of his time and made scholarly notes. And, after he returned from an extended tour, he wrote a travelogue. In all, he has contributed six highly valuable travelogues to Kannada literature.

Despite frustrations and hardships, Karanth's creative energy was in full flow during the Forties and Fifties. By the time Karanth turned Fifty (1952), he had roughly written twenty regular plays and nine musicals or operas, twenty-one novels, one encyclopaedia, one dictionary, one travelogue, and one autobiography besides innumerable stray articles on education, art, and religion. As is well known, awards and various forms of recognition sought Karanth in his latter part of life. However, sad to say, the first recognition for his achievements came not from his own people but from a foreign institution.

Yakshagana, the most popular and vibrant performing art of North and South Canara districts of Karnataka, had a

long-lasting interest for Karanth. It is due to Karanth's innovative efforts that Yakshagana has achieved national as well as international recognition today. In the Forties, Karanth did much research regarding this art-form, met many scholars and artists, and wrote a scholarly work on it. It was published in 1957, under the title *Yakshagana Bayalata*. A Swedish institution, by name International Dance Archives of Stockholm, came to know of the scholarly work through one Ralph de Marie who had come to Mangalore to study Yakshagana, and decided to honour the work. The director of the institution, Bendt Haegar, came all the way to Puttur, and presented a bronze medal to Karanth in recognition of his service to the art-form, in 1958. In the following year, the same work was given the Central Sahitya Akademi Award. Karnatak University and Mysore University, bestowed on Karanth honorary D.Litt. degrees, in 1962 and 63 respectively.

When life thus seemed to take a turn for the better, misfortune struck the Karanths out of the blue. Their eldest son Harsha, who never enjoyed good health, came down from Bombay to see them. He had been complaining of chest pain for some time, and he brought with him his X-ray photographs. Looking at them, the Karanths were quite perturbed and urged him to return immediately to Bombay and consult Dr.Baliga, a family friend. Dr. Baliga took him to Bombay hospital where a series of tests was conducted which revealed a malignant growth in his chest. The Karanths rushed to Bombay and Harsha was operated upon. Unfortunately, Harsha left this world on January 30, 1961.

The parents were dumbfounded. Karanth remembered a question which Harsha as a boy had asked him in Balavana; "Father, what will you do when I die?" Karanth had not given

him any answer then. Karanth bore his son's loss stoically and consoled himself and others round him saying "the gift Nature had given us, Nature took away." However, Leela Karanth was shattered by her son's untimely death.

Just three years earlier, Leela's grandmother, who stayed with the Karanths at Puttur, had passed away. Leela was much attached to her because she had looked after her, after her (Leela's) mother's death and her father's remarriage. Her death and funeral rites had shaken Leela Karanth. When her son also died, she could take it no more. Since then she began to suffer from depression and hallucinations. For the next 28 years she suffered and Karanth also suffered. As Karanth says, "there was enough reason to curse Fate and hit back. If I had not been involved in some pursuit or the other, I do not know what my life would have become" (*Ten*, p.210). It was at this time that Leela Karanth became a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba and began to visit him regularly. She wrote many songs in his praise.

By the time Karanth was seventy, he began to feel that there was not much left for him to do at Puttur; and he began to feel restless. One of the main reasons for his restlessness was the passing away of his long-time friend-patron Molahalli Shiva Rao. Karanth collected funds from various sources and built a hall in memory of Shiva Rao at Puttur; and he began to think of moving away from Puttur where he had done so much and suffered so much.

At this time, one of his rich admirers, Ramakrishna Aithal, decided to build a house at Saligrama, about two miles from Kota (Karanth's birthplace), and persuaded Karanth to shift there. Karanth agreed and left Puttur after having spent 43 years there. Thus began, in 1974, the last phase of Karanth's life at Saligrama. In a way, it was 'home coming' for Karanth.

During this last phase of Karanth at Saligrama, a new person entered his life - Malini Mallya. Since 1940, Karanth had been used to having an amanuensis, to whom he would dictate first, be it a novel or a play or an article, and later on correct and finalise the script prepared by him/her. After settling down at Saligrama, he was on the look out for such an amanuensis and Malini Mallya, a young woman who had been working then in a private institution, offered her services. Since then, for about three decades, Malini worked for Karanth in different capacities : as an amanuensis, secretary, and a companion. She brought some order to the life of Karanth and organized and edited his stray articles published in eight volumes, his letters, and a very useful bibliography of the works of and on Karanth. Karanth used to call her his "talking stick."

Karanth had been honoured with the Padmabhushana Award by the Indian government in 1968. However, when Emergency was imposed on the country by Mrs.Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister, in 1975, Karanth returned the Award with a pointed letter to the President. A few lines of the famous letter, dated October 2, 1975, are worth quoting:

As a 74-year old person, I have to hang my head in shame. I do not concede to anyone the right to take away personal freedom for any reason whatsoever. Although I have stayed away from politics for many decades, I am compelled, as a writer, to protest against this affront to the people of India. If for nothing else, at least to console my conscience, I am returning the award that had been given to me. Let truth prevail over untruth.  
(*Ten*, pp.243-44)

The highest award for literature in India, the Jnanapitha Award, was bestowed on Karanth in 1978, for his novel

*Mookajjiya Kanasugalu* ('Mookajji's Visions'). This was the third Jnanapitha Award for Kannada Literature, and there were felicitations to Karanth throughout Karnataka. "For three months," he says, "I was not able to do anything else..." The Award-function was held in Birla Bhavan in Bombay, and the Chief Justice of India, Justice Chandrachud, presided over the function. With his sheer will-power, sustained hard work, and very high creativity, Karanth had reached the pinnacle of glory and recognition.

Leela Karanth, who had been ailing for a long time, left him and this world on September 22, 1986. Thus ended the fifty-year partnership of Leela and Karanth. Karanth had both deep love and respect for his wife, who had taken all the responsibilities on herself and given total freedom for Karanth to freely move about and write. "And the voice which made our guests feel at home...." wrote Karanth later, "was stilled. And I who wandered around and accepted the hospitality of so many, could no longer feel that I had a home where I could offer a glass of water and a platter of food to those who came." (*Ten*, p.276)

Leela Karanth died in 1986, and, coincidentally, that was the year in which the last novel of Karanth was published though he continued to write travelogues and articles. However, the last two decades of Karanth's life were devoted to another cause and another kind of fight - the cause of Environment and fight against shortsighted atomic scientists and multinational companies.

From the very beginning, Karanth's philosophy of life was that Man is not the roof and crown of creation, and that Nature and other forms of life are not created solely for the consumption

of Man. With such a view of life, as one can expect, Karanth could not keep quiet when, during the Eighties, many multi-national companies were allowed to exploit the resources of the coastal-regions. Also, being fully acquainted with the Chernobyl and Three-mile-island disasters, he could not accept at the face value the assurances of Indian nuclear scientists that nuclear plants were completely safe. He directly entered the scene when the government of India decided to set up a nuclear plant at Kaiga, North Kanara. He wrote extensively about the possible danger of the Kaiga Nuclear Reactor and wholeheartedly supported the Environmentalists in their fight against nuclear plants, Narmada Project, Bedti Project and Cogentrix. He travelled extensively and strove to build up public support for environment protection. Though he could not prevent the Kaiga Plant coming up, he succeeded, filing a PIL in the High Court and later in the Supreme Court, in stalling the Cogentrix and Bedti Projects.

Towards the end of his revised autobiography Karanth writes : "Even worlds are born and they die. Oceans and mountains arise and disappear. In what way are their inhabitants special? There can be nothing more foolish than to desire immortality" (*Ten* p.290). Karanth was not immortal and he, certainly, did not covet immortality. Being active physically and mentally till the very end (he dictated a long article for the special issue of a newspaper on the Annual Kannada Conference, a day prior to his death), Karanth left this world on December 9, 1997, in his ripe age of ninety-five. And, with him, a very sensitive conscience-keeper of modern India was silenced. As many editorials registered, an era had come to an end.-



## II

In the first two decades of the 20th century, during which period Karanth's intellectual-literary ideas and ideals were formed, colonialism in India was at its peak in terms of power and influence. The Indian response to colonialism, as could be expected, was complex and contradictory. On the one hand, the Indian society had accepted the colonial discourse equating progress with English education and modernity. On the other hand, it had developed a strong sense of nationalism, fiercely asserting native traditions and glorifying the country's rich past. As a corollary to such pan-Indian currents of nationalism, the Reform Movements like Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj had swept through the country leading to tumultuous changes in all the spheres of Indian life in a breathtaking pace. The Novel in Kannada (and other regional languages) came into being in such a context.

The first 'Realistic' novel in Kannada, *Indira Bai* by Gulvadi Venkata Rao, was published in 1899, just three years prior to the birth of Karanth. It was shaped by varied forces active in those days: the colonial discourse, the Reformist movement launched by Arya Samaj, the established Indian narrative traditions, and Yakshagana, the popular folk form of dance-drama. The Kannada novel displays the interplay of all these forces crisscrossing one another.

It is very significant that the first 'Realistic' novel in Kannada was born in coastal Karnataka. For, it was this part of Karnataka that first opened itself to missionary activities (the work of the Basel Mission being legendary) and English education. Therefore, new ideas and newer forms of expression were first generated in coastal Karnataka with Mangalore as its

centre of all activities. It was here in Mangalore that, besides the first novel in Kannada (1899), the first short story (1900), the first Kannada translation of English lyrics (1918), the first Kannada newspaper (1843) - all came into being.

While Arya Samaj, which had a branch in Mangalore, was very active and influential in the field of religion, the National Movement was dynamic under the leadership of Karnad Sadashiva Rao. Also, there flourished in coastal Karnataka many religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity) and many cultures and languages (Kannada, Tulu, Konkani, and English). It was very appropriate, almost inevitable, that the first Reformist novel in Kannada was to be born in such a society.

Gulvadi's *Indira Bai* can be considered a paradigm of the Reformist novel. At one level, it posits and advocates the colonial equation of 'English education = Modernity = Progress.' It associates everything that is regressive - religiosity, hypocrisy, superstitions, and criminality - with one set of characters; and everything that is progressive - rationality, honesty, work-ethics and respect for women - with another set of characters. The central concerns of the novel are widow-marriage and women's education; and Bhaskara Rao, after his education in England, returns to his birth-place, marries the young widow Indira Bai, and fights against Hindu orthodoxy and caste-system.

At the same time, the novel, subtly but surely, undercuts the colonial equation of 'English education = Modernity = Progress.' The sub-title of the novel is 'Sadharma Vijaya' or the triumph of true Dharma. The novel that champions sweeping social reforms including widow-remarriage, portrays the widow (Indira Bai) whom the normative protagonist marries as an

'Akshata Kanya' or virgin. Also, throughout the novel we come across such authorial comments: "we don't know how this ritual has a place among the Veda Mantras and Grihya Sutras." The implication is that the author finds fault not with the Vedas, Shodasha Samskaras and Grihya Sutras, but with those rites and rituals that have been associated with Hinduism through blind beliefs and evil practices.

Above all, what is significant about this novel is that, for the first time, marginalised characters and dialects find a place in a major narrative: we find servants and cooks speaking in Konkani and Tulu throughout the Kannada novel.

It was such a Reformist novel, wandering between two worlds rather precariously, that Karanth inherited. True, there was another model of historical romances (inspired by Bankim's famous novel *Anandmath*) which glorified the Hindu past as a counter point to the colonial discourse - the Hindu past of the Vijayanagara / Hoysala empires in Karnataka or the Maratha / Rajput empires and heroes. But Karanth, the born-rebel and non-conformist, totally rejected the 'Anandmath-model' and continued as well as enriched the Reformist model. While his first play had the evils of drunkenness as its subject, his first novel (*Kanyabali*) dealt with the plight of widows in Hindu society and prostitution. In fact, Karanth retained such crusading spirit against the entrenched institutions and practices of Hindu society throughout his life.

This was the reason why, in novel after novel and speech after speech, Karanth mocked and ridiculed 'sanyasis' and heads of religious institutions, hypocritical political leaders and trade-union leaders, and officialdom. Karanth's ideal was honesty, unqualified. What mattered to him was 'now,' 'this

life' and not 'afterlife'. Hence, he did not much bother about the existence or otherwise of God; and he called himself a 'non-theist' -not an atheist. In this sense, his ideal was Buddha, about whom he makes the following very significant remarks:

I thus came to consider life more important than divinity. This must be the reason why Gautama Buddha did not speak about God at all. He spoke about living... His message was, as long as we lived we should be one with the life of the world" (*Ten*, p.94).

Karant was a voluminous writer and the total number of his works exceeds four hundred. Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this monograph to consider even his major works in detail. What I propose to do is to set up some rather loose categories of his works and discuss the most representative work/s in each category. The rough categories are as shown below :

- (1) Novels of Karant: Reformist Novels, Social Sagas, Political Novels, and *Kunstlerroman*;
- (2) Plays, Travelogues, and Discursive writings.

While the second chapter discusses Reformist Novels and Social Sagas, the third chapter discusses political novels and Artist-novels. The fourth chapter studies Karant's plays, travelogues and discursive writings. The last chapter attempts to sum up Karant the man and the writer.

✱

## CHAPTER II

### MAJOR NOVELS -1

#### REFORMIST NOVELS AND SOCIAL SAGAS

#### A) REFORMIST NOVELS :

Karantb began his literary career with two detective novels on the model of Sexton Blake novels. But very soon he realised he was wasting his time and that of his readers with such novels. Then he wrote two satires inspired by *Erehwon*: *Devadootaru* and *Gnana*. But he was not satisfied with these also. In those days social reform was in the air, and the first Kannada novel, *Indira Bai*, had launched the Reformist novel with great fanfare; and immediately it had been translated into English by one Couchman, the Collector of the district then. *Indira Bai* was followed by other similar novels such as *Vagdevi*, (1905), *Rohini* (1906), and *Bhagirathi* (1905). Later, Thirumalamba (the first modern woman - novelist in Kannada) wrote *Susheelee* (1913), *Vidyullata* (1914), *Nabha* (1920), and others. All these novels were concerned with widow-remarriage, women's education, eradication of caste-system, and decadence of religious centres and institutions; they advocated, with a

passionate urgency 'modern' education and sweeping social reforms in the Hindu society.

Karant was familiar with all these novels; and to him, as to everyone else in those days, Nationalist Movement was inseparable from social reform. On the model of Gulvadi Venkata Rao and Thirumalamba, he wrote two small novels: *Nirbhagya Janma* (1925) and *Kanyabali* (1932), both of which were serialised in his own periodical *Vasantha*. Both these novelettes (and his plays) dealt with the suffering of young widows/young girls and the problem of prostitution in a male-dominated feudal society. The characters were completely either black or white, and the writer's attack on society was scathing and direct.

However, very soon, Karant came out of such crude and simplistic view of life. As he himself recalls:

Later on, I began to realise that the people of my early plays and stories/novels were not to be found in real life, and that people in real life were neither black nor white but of mixed shades.....

Before we either condemn or admire others, what is expected of us if we desire to know what Life is, is first to understand such people. Be it an injustice or evil social practice or person, we should make an honest attempt to seek answers to such questions: 'why did it happen?' and 'why did he act and behave in such and such a way?' What would I have done if I were to be in his position?

(*Smrithi* : 2:22-23)

Consequently, in his next novel Karant attempted to examine a problem from as many different points of view as possible; and the result was the first great novel of Karant,

*Chomana Dudi* ('Choma's Drum'). It was published in 1933, and, as he himself recalls, this was the novel that earned him recognition throughout Karnataka. Through this work, Karanth widened the scope of the Reformist novel and added new dimensions to it.

At the centre of the novel lies the problem of 'untouchability,' the bane of the Hindu society for centuries. Choma, the protagonist of the novel, belongs to a 'low' caste called 'Mera'; the members of which were forbidden by tradition (till India became a republic) even to own a small piece of land. They were condemned to labour for their masters and eke out a hand-to-mouth existence. During marriages and festivals or illness, they would incur small debts, to clear which they would go up the Ghats and work for a few months in coffee estates. But the conditions being inhuman there, most of them would fall ill or die, the burden of debt to be passed on from father to son. Thus they would be born in poverty and debt, and they would die in poverty and debt.

Choma, with a family of five children, has a pair of oxen which he found abandoned as calves in a forest. He raises them, and his sole ambition in life is to own a piece of land and cultivate it using his oxen. Hence, he doesn't want to sell them at any cost. But caste-prejudices being overriding, his dream of owning a piece of land remains a dream. In course of time, one of his sons dies due to the illness contracted in the coffee estates; another son gets drowned in a pond while the on-lookers do nothing to save him since he is 'untouchable'; and one more son gets converted to Christianity. Added to all these, one day he sees his unmarried daughter in the arms of the manager of the coffee-estate. Completely broken, Choma gets

drunk, shuts himself up in his hut, and wildly goes on playing on his small drum ('dudi') till dawn. At dawn, "the drum, the hand raised to play on it, the suppressed suffering - all are there. But Choma is no more."

What immediately strikes the readers of this novel is the artistic restraint shown by the novelist. Easily the writer could have indulged in melodrama and sentimentality. But, Karanth's narrator intentionally puts on the role of a reporter in order to avoid melodrama; and succeeds in conveying to the readers the untold pain and acute humiliation that Choma and his children suffer, through apt symbols. The oxen which Choma loves more than his children are in the end wounded and let loose in the forest; the drum is Choma's constant companion which he plays always to forget his sorrow. These two, the oxen and the drum, and the darkness (literal as well as metaphorical) with which the novel begins and ends, ably convey to the reader both Choma's doom and the inhumanity of the caste-system.

Moreover, what is noteworthy about this novel is the mature understanding of the problem on the part of Karanth. Mulk Raj Anand, whose *Untouchable* also was published around the same time, views and condemns the caste-system on moral and ethical grounds. Hence he appears to accept the Gandhian path as the solution to the awful system. But to Karanth, basically, it is an economic problem, one of ownership; and hence, at the end of the novel he offers no easy solutions. Unless those like Choma, condemned to work for others, acquire economic independence and social position through land-ownership (the novel tells us), their plight cannot be ameliorated. It took four decades and another great man, Devaraj Urs (the Chief Minister of Karnataka in the 70's), to realise this truth and introduce Land Reforms on a massive scale in Karnataka.



The novel also throws light on why colonialism was not seen as an unmitigated disaster in India. Rather, it was even welcomed and the colonial master was respected because colonialism showed an alternative for the lower castes to alleviate their misery through conversion to Christianity. When one of his sons becomes a Christian, Choma tells himself: "No more! I won't have anything to do with the god of this village any longer. Now I will accept the Christians' god - the god who made my son a farmer" (p.47). Of course, Choma finds his faith and beliefs too strong to break away from; but the novel shows one, Choma's son, who does break away.

Karant continued to write Reformist novels, and relentlessly exposed through such novels the rigidity and the resulting cruelty of orthodox Hinduism. One of the major concerns of his Reformist novels after *Chomana Dudi* is the women's position in the traditional Hindu society. Following Manu, traditional Hindu society ruthlessly practices Manu's dictum that "no woman deserves freedom" ('na stree swathanthryam arhati'). The woman, denied education and economic independence, is forced to depend totally on her father or husband or children; in fact, she does not have an existence of her own apart from these people. It is such agony and anguish of women in Hindu society that Karant effectively registers in his Reformist novels.

Among such woman-oriented novels, the most satirical is *Sarasamma's Samadhi* ('The Grave of Sarasamma,' 1937). This novel narrates the sad tales of four families in which the wives are, on one ground or another, ill-treated and humiliated. There is a temple in their village, built to commemorate a legendary woman, Sarasamma, who is believed to have committed 'Sati' out of her love and respect for her husband. It is believed that if

a wife with any grievance comes to the temple and worships the 'Maha Sati,' her problems will be solved.

In the same village, there lives a sceptic, Chandrayya, who does not believe either in gods or in spirits. He is a confirmed bachelor because according to him "marriage is a chain that two individuals voluntarily put on themselves to go through hell." Once, he accosts a spirit hovering around the 'Sati' temple. The spirit tells him that she is the dissatisfied spirit of the 'great woman worshipped in the temple,' and that while alive she was married off to a sick person, after whose death she was forcibly burnt to death with her husband's body. Thus the myth of 'Sati' is exposed to be what it is - a woman's enslavement in a convention-ridden, patriarchal society.

Among such women-oriented novels, there are two common character-patterns to be noticed: the hollow and hypocritical 'holy man' and the suffering and altruistic old woman. "What matters to me is life. Equally valuable to me are the means that enable us to understand life. The senses are not our enemies. And the mind and intellect which grow with the aid of the senses cannot also be our enemies," says Karanth (*Ten*, p.94). To such a man committed to living, sadhus and sanyasis, the so-called 'God-men' and 'holy men', naturally appear to be both hypocritical and escapist.

We come across many 'sanyasis' or 'holy men' in Karanth's novels: Krishnananda (*Sanyasiya Baduku*, 1948), Swamiji (*Sameekshe*, 1956), Bhagavanji (*Jagadoddhara-na*, 1960), Abhutananda (*Aala-Nirala*, 1962), Abhinananda (*Kevala Manushyaru*, 1971), and such. All these characters, without any exception, are portrayed as having run away from home to escape their responsibilities. Having no real wisdom or love for

humanity, these holy men lead a life of ease and luxury, deceiving people with esoteric sermons and practices. If one can attempt a generalisation in this context, one can say that there are not many people or types whom Karanth totally disapproves; he sympathises with even criminals and adultrous people. However, he despises those who are dishonest and hypocritical - the Sadhus and Sanyasins.

In contrast to such holy men who, according to Karanth, run away from responsibilities, we find another set of characters in Karanth's novels - poor and old women who work throughout their lives to make the lives of others a little more comfortable and tolerable. We find in this category such strong and normative old women like Sarasoti and Paroti (*Marali Mannige*, 1941), Rukmai (*Sanyasiya Baduku*), Honnaji (*Innonde Dari*, 1968), Kaveramma (*Shaneeshwarana Neralalli*, 1960,) and such. These women, of course, are god-fearing and have strong religious faith. But, still, Karanth has great respect for them, because though continuously battered in life they retain their faith in life and living. As Karanth pictures them, their motto in life is 'Karmana Pararthaaha.' To use the lines of Yeats, they are "weather-worn marble tritons in the streams." They earn unqualified admiration from Karanth.

#### **B) SOCIAL SAGAS:**

Karanth is a superb socio-cultural historian, and no other novelist in Kannada (with the exception, perhaps, of Dr. K.V.Puttapa, the first Jnanapeeth Awardee in Kannada), has registered the sweeping and breathtaking changes that swept through the Indian Society, beginning with the colonial rule in the 18th century and gathering momentum with the introduction of Western institutions in India, in the 19th century. Most of Karanth's highly successful works belong to this category.

The first ambitious (and the most successful according to the majority of critics) saga in this category is *Marali Mannige* ('Back to the Soil,' 1941). It is a saga of three generations, covering the period from 1850 to 1940; and through it Karanth documents three major stages of social change.

The representative characters of the first generation are Rama Aithal, two of his wives Parothi and Sathyabhama, and his sister Sarasothi. Their lives throughout are governed by age-old traditions, customs, and rituals. Rama Aithal's occupations are the ones that are handed down to him by tradition and he has no choice in them: agriculture and officiating in the religious ceremonies of others of his caste in the village. Since his first wife Parothi is childless, he marries another (Sathyabhama) who gives birth to a boy and a girl. Rama Aithal's is a hard life: paddy cultivation depends upon the vagaries of Nature; and people, owing to English education, have begun to lose their faith in customs and rituals. Tired of his hard and traditional life, Rama Aithal decides, for the first time in his family, to give his son modern English education.

Laccha (short form of Lakshman), the son of Rama Aithal, represents the second generation, the generation that falls an easy prey to the lure of modernity. In order to get 'modern' education, he has to go from one city to a bigger city. Freed of all parental control and community-restraints, he begins to indulge in gambling and women of loose morals, squandering his father's hard-earned money irresponsibly. Even after marriage, he does not change his ways of life; and, after his father's death, he sells of all his property, leaving his mother, his wife and his only son, as destitutes.

Rama, his son, represents the struggle, conflicts, and dilemmas of the third generation just prior to independence.

Amidst untold hardships (since he and his mother are abandoned by his father) and grinding poverty, Rama succeeds in getting a good education, culminating in a Bachelor's degree. But then, like many of his generation, he suffers from unemployment, and moves from one small job to another. Also, since these are the days of National Movement for freedom under the charismatic leadership of Gandhiji, he - like thousands of other young men - joins the Congress Party and participates in the Movement. Finally, he makes a decision as different and as consequential as that of his grand father - he decides to return to his village and take up agriculture as his profession.

What we have to notice first in the novel is the objectivity with which Karanth depicts the three generations and the corresponding three phases of the Indian society, spanning one hundred years before independence. It is very tempting for a novelist to depict younger generations as weak and decadent, and to be nostalgic about the traditional, 'pre-modern,' Indian society. But Karanth overcomes this temptation and registers both the passions and pains of a changing society; and he, albeit indirectly, evaluates each phase as dispassionately as a social historian.

Let us consider the first generation itself. True, it is a generation which believes in manual labour (even women work in the paddy fields), a work-ethics and traditional morality. But it is also true, as Karanth makes it clear, that it is totally a patriarchal society in which (as Rama Aithal once proudly declares before his neighbour) there is only one master in the family and that is the husband. Wives are the unpaid maids who are expected to work, from dawn to midnight, both inside and outside the house, and be content with that. Such a traditional

society is so male-oriented that Rama Aithal does not inform, let alone consult, his wife and sister before finalising even the date of his second marriage. His sister sums up the existing man-woman relationship thus: "Alas! To this brother women at home are as inconsequential as dust. We are needed only to scrub and polish the floor; but we just don't exist whenever any decisions are to be taken" (1996 edn.,p.50). Rama Aithal's first wife, Parothi, typifies the agony and frustration of women in such a patriarchal system. Her last wish is to rest her head on her husband's lap (after, perhaps, decades of loneliness) a few minutes before breathing her last.

This is the reason why Karanth, like many other writers and thinkers of his time, is always ambivalent toward colonialism. For, he knew full well that traditional Indian society was full of inhuman practices and customs like marginalisation of women and caste-system; and that the colonial rule, with its secular English education and 'modern,' 'progressive' views could successfully combat such traditional evils of the Indian society. English education, breaking through caste-sect barriers, opens up untold opportunities for all sections of Society. Also, it affords upward social mobility. Karanth registers all these complex factors including the economic factor, related to English education in its early phase:

(Rama Aithal's) mind was in a turmoil. Would it be of any use if he sent his only son to a government school? Who would continue his 'Vedic' profession later?... But there were also other thoughts pounding his mind for a long time. He had heard so often that the eldest son of Vasudeva Gurikara had become a lawyer at Kundapur and that clients had been, like ants, lining up before his

house to shower money on him. He began to wonder why his son, Laccha, also should not become a lawyer or an advocate. If Sheena Mayya's (his neighbour), children can amass wealth by running a hotel, why shouldn't his son learn English, set up his practice as a lawyer in his own home town, and amass wealth? (p.126) The government doesn't consider (Rama Aithal was told) anything like that (of starting one's education on an auspicious day like Vijaya Dashami). There is one government school at Karkada which children can join on any day, any week. They run the school even on Ekadashi (a day of fasting) and New Moon day (considered inauspicious), like the Kundapur Fair. They don't consider any day proper or improper. Are you thinking of sending your son to such schools? In those schools all are jumbled - Brahmins' children and oil-pressers' children all sit together on the benches (p.127).

However, reenacting Macaulay's casting vote, Rama Aithal, like millions of his contemporaries, opts for English education, and sends his son to a government school.

English education, synonymous then with modernity, while it lured many like Rama Aithal with its promise of wealth and social position, also threatened them with the prospect of alienation. The portrayal of Laccha and Orata of the second generation symbolises the fears and anxiety that the traditional Indian society experienced vis-a-vis English education, in its early phase. Laccha and Orata become totally uprooted and waste their lives in irresponsible licentiousness. Karanth documents such cultural alienation resulting from English education in these words:

As days and months passed, he (Laccha) began to like such new life more and more. He also developed the sharpness and easy volubility that he found among the city-people. The new kind of English education gave him a sort of arrogance also. Whenever villagers crossed him on the road, he would invariably talk in English with his friends. (Even at home) he would be itching to talk English with his father and step-mother (p.144).

In course of time, Laccha begins to avoid coming to his parental home since he does not like the kind of food prepared there, and cannot share any work that his parents and elders do. Such aversion for everything associated with rural and traditional life so alienates him that he becomes a total stranger to his own family and surroundings. In fact, cultural/parental alienation resulting from English education and modernisation is one of the themes repeated in many other novels of Karanth. Bearing in mind that cultural alienation need not always be negative, we can find the variations of Laccha in Shambhu (*Bettada Jeeva*), Shankara Jois (*Shaneshwarana Neralalli*), Ramachandraiah (*Kudiyara Koosu*), and many others.

That English education need not necessarily alienate one, and that one could profitably bring together all that is good in both tradition and modernity is shown in Rama of the third generation, the generation that the writer himself belongs to. Rama does get English education; but the same education teaches him how to fight against colonialism. During his college days, Rama comes across a book called *India In Bondage* by Sunderland. He is so moved by it that he tells his friend: "When an outsider (Sunderland) sheds such profuse tears over our lack



of freedom, shouldn't we feel the bondage much more intensely? Should we, like tiger cubs born in prison, believe that our home is the prison?" He joins the Freedom Movement and, following Gandhi's ideals, begins to actively participate in the Non-cooperation Movement, advocacy of 'Swadeshi' products, adult education, prohibition, and such other constructive programmes.

Karanth is such a sensitive social historian that almost no aspect of a particular phenomenon (in this case English education) escapes his notice. As he ably documents in *Marali Mannige*, English education does open up new careers like those of a lawyer, a civil servant, or a police officer. But it also creates the problem of unemployment for the first time in India. Till secular educational system entered India through colonialism, professions and occupations of all sections of society used to be determined by one's caste and custom - a farmer's son would continue farming; a barber's son would continue as a barber, ... Hence, there used to be no question of unemployment, occupation being hereditary and guaranteed (however low or high) by tradition. But modern English education, not closely aligned to any one profession and having uprooted young men from their soil, creates, for the first time, a national problem called 'unemployment,' which continues to be a bigger and vaster problem in independent India. Rama, of the third generation in the novel, experiences this gigantic problem. He spends months together in big cities like Madras and Bombay, looking in vain for a job. Finally he decides to take up his grand father's job, that of agriculture.

During the second half of the 19th century, the British began to set up huge industries in India. Industrialisation meant urbanisation; and urbanisation meant mass migration from villages to the cities. One of the major consequences of

urbanisation was the coming into being of what came to be later called Hotel industry. In the society in which selling food was considered a sin and uninvited guests were to be treated like gods ('atithi devo bhava'), now it becomes a highly profitable, money-spinning business. The sons of Sheena Mayya (the neighbour and rival of Rama Aithal in the novel) set up a hotel in Bangalore, make a lot of money, and begin to buy up all available lands in their native village; and this fact spurs Rama Aithal also to give his son modern education.

But hotels, like schools and hospitals set up by the colonial power, do not respect traditional taboos and distinctions. As once Rama Aithal remarks contemptuously, any person of any caste how-so-ever 'low,' can enter the hotel and demand equal treatment with others. Hotels, as places of food and shelter for lonely people, as the meeting-ground for gossip-mongers, and as instruments of levelling social inequalities, have an important place in many novels of Karanth, and they constitute a major thematic preoccupation of most of the novelists and short-story writers of the 20th century, in Kannada. (Interestingly, the first modern short story in Kannada, published in 1900, is about a hotel, called "Hotel in Kamalapura.")

*Marali Mannige* also introduces another major concern of Karanth regarding the nature and function of fine arts in the modern society. Here again Karanth is a non-conformist. Rama of the third generation is a great lover and practitioner of music; he is an expert violinist, and he can weave musical webs of notes around himself and others listening to him. But what he plays is neither orthodox classical music with set scales and timing nor popular film music. Music for him is a means of expressing varied emotions without any restrictions of 'raga' and 'thala'. In fact, Karanth was so passionately involved with

the issue of tradition and experimentation in arts that not only he wrote many novels centred on artists but, in his life also, he carried out many innovations in the field of Yakshagana, a popular performing art-form of the coastal region.

The next major work to be considered in this context is *Mookajjiya Kanasugalu* (1968; 'The Visions of Mookajji'). This was the novel cited when, in 1978, Karanth was awarded the prestigious Jnanapeeth Award. This very complex and ambitious novel can be approached from different points of view.

Primarily, it attempts to document, from an anthropological point of view, the changing nature of religions, customs, and attitudes to God and sex. Since the subject is so vast and complicated, Karanth introduces a special narrator who has supernatural powers. It is an old woman, Mookajji by name, who, after being married at the age of ten, becomes a widow within six months and returns to her parental home to spend the rest of her life. As she is very reticent, every one in the house calls her 'mookajji' - dumb grandma. If she holds something or some one in her hands and begins to contemplate on it/him or her, she has the ability to visualise everything related to it/him or her.

Her grandson, Subraya, is a student of history; and he has great respect for her intuitive powers. Whenever he comes to his village, he spends most of his time collecting various pieces of antiquity (bones, shards of pottery, broken idols, etc.), and learning their history through Mookajji. There are two narrators in this work: what the old woman tells her grandson is retold by him for his readers. "This novel doesn't have either a hero or a heroine. In fact, even Mookajji is not the heroine of this work. Her task is to hear and thus soften minds frozen by customary beliefs," says Karanth in his preface to this novel. Mookajji is a symbol - a symbol of our questioning, sceptical mind.

Mookajji does not believe in the existence of an anthropomorphic God. She firmly maintains that God is Man's creation. According to her, beginning with the Vedic period, India has witnessed varied conflicts between races, religions, and cultures; and in consequence of these conflicts, gods and goddesses, rituals and customs, and beliefs and faiths have been continuously changing. There is no single concept, or ideology or view that can be considered 'original' or 'pure'.

Old gods have given place to new ones, and old ways of social organisation (such as matriarchy) have been replaced by new ways (such as patriarchy) in course of time. "How many stories, how many myths?" comments Mookajji once, in one of her trances, "How many gods! How many concepts and how many constructs? It is impossible among these to distinguish the original from its counterfeit, the truth from falsehood." She elaborates this point on another occasion thus:

The Mother-goddess is the oldest, and the first. Mother and Linga — these were born first. Then people created new myths for the same old gods, and gave them new names, new incarnations. As many gods were created as required by people, who built them temples and domes. One pulled down what another had built; and the third one built an entirely new one. Gods multiplied in thousands. What did people achieve by such multiplicity? In the place of one God whose children we are supposed to be, they divided the gods ten fold, hundred fold; they wrote five hundred myths; and endlessly argued..... They fiercely fought among themselves, each claiming Truth and God on his side. Madness, sheer madness! Illusion, grand illusions! (p.295)

Similarly, Mookajji finds Man's attitude to sex irrational and baffling. Throughout the history of mankind, almost all religions and codes of morality have looked down upon sex; and have posited sex as antithetical to spirituality. It is viewed as base and degrading, and condemned as an impediment to one's spiritual growth. Through Mookajji, Karanth mounts a harsh critique of such an unnatural and hypocritical attitude to sex. "The problem of sex that haunts all living beings including mankind is a major concern of mine," says Karanth in his introduction to the novel, and continues: "In this novel I have undertaken the bold task of examining its changing form through the entire range of Time and Place."

In one of her trances or 'visions,' Mookajji sees a pre-historic tribe indulging in communal sex in front of their cult-goddess, and comments:

When I saw such a scene, initially, I felt it was disgusting. Such a reaction is natural for people who have developed a strong sense of 'shame'. But these people do not have any such false sense of propriety. They are freely playing a game that God has asked them to play. In fact, I see a sense of devotion on their faces..... Giving birth is not shameful; neither is living nor dying. Then, why should the act of begetting be considered shameful? (p.108)

The philosophy of life advocated by Karanth through Mookajji can be called Stoicism. Mookajji stands for a calm acceptance of whatever Life has to offer one. She explains this point very crisply in these words:

This is how I look at it. We don't know why we are born and why we continue to live. But, as long as we are alive, we should strive to lead such a life that makes us

happy — and others happy. Others includes all forms of life. This may not be easy. When most people have to struggle all through the day just to fill their belly, they may be unable to help others. But the least we can do is this — to live without harming others. If we cannot help others, at least, let us not cause any trouble to others. (p.234)

Another major aspect of the novel is its concern with the issues of Reality and Fantasy. Here, we find Karanth attempting to transcend the rigid framework of 'Realism' by questioning its very ideological basis of 'Truth'. As Subraya, the second narrator points out, "Real world appears unreal, and the unreal appears real. Between the real and the unreal, the distance is very little - as little as between Truth and non-Truth."

Also, at the level of art and literature, the second narrator Subraya raises this pertinent question: "Even those stories which are not realistic give us great satisfaction. What is the reason for it?" Immediately, he himself gives the answer that it is so because of readers' "desires and expectations," and continues: "We desire Seetha to live; and hence the author makes her live." In other words, readers expect a work to satisfy the needs of 'Natural Justice,' and a work, if it has to survive, has to fulfill those needs. It is only because they satisfy, in the final analysis, the common man's views of what is wrong and what is right, what is just and what is unjust, classics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha* have retained their appeal and relevance for thousands of years.

*Mai Managala Suliyalli* (1970; 'Caught in the Whirlpool of Body and Mind') is a very unusual saga in the sense that it documents the changing Indian society spanning roughly one hundred years before independence, from the point of view of

four generations of women who belong to the oldest profession. Even the art of narration is unusual: the omniscient narrator introduces the characters and sets the scene in the beginning and then leaves the major part of narration to Manjula of the second generation; and her narration is in the form of a diary. The novel begins with Manjula, then goes back to the story of her mother Bhavani, and then moves forward to the stories of Manjula's adopted daughter Sharada and her daughter Chandri. In the words of Karanth, *Mai Managala Suliyalli* was written to examine four phases of sexuality" (introduction to *Kevala Manushyaru*).

The phrase, 'four phases of sexuality', at first applies to the four women who differ in their attitude to sexuality. Bhavani of the first generation belongs to the feudal society in which having mistresses besides one's wife was not considered improper. Bhavani, of course, is a true professional who believes that "we are here to sell our bodies, not hearts." Still, as was common in the pre-modern, pre-industrial society, she is as loyal and true to her 'master' as his married wife. However, her daughter Manjula, around whom the novel revolves, cannot be content with mere bodily pleasure. Being a great singer and well-versed in Sanskrit literature, she yearns for that kind of sexual experience that can satisfy the hunger of her body as well as mind. However, though seven men come into her life, for one reason or another, they leave her frustrated; they can satisfy only her body or mind, but not both. Her adopted daughter, Shari, owing to economic conditions, has to make do with selling her body irrespective of her personal needs or wants. Chandri, of the fourth generation, has had English education; hence she has developed total dislike for her family profession. She consciously opts for economic independence in the form of a teaching job and/or the life of a married woman.

'The four faces of sexuality' that Karanth indicates as the major concerns of the novel can also be interpreted differently as:

- a) sexuality that, owing to the pressure of circumstances, becomes a mechanical 'business,' with no obligations on either partner;
- b) sexuality that gets suppressed owing to specific reasons;
- c) sexuality that is regulated by a religious/ethical framework;
- d) and sexuality that transcends religious/ethical frameworks and still is respected.

The novel brilliantly pictures in the beginning the kind of sexuality that is purely mechanical and 'businesslike'; and this depiction becomes a sensitive commentary on industrialised and urbanised social system. Basarur (the locale of the novel; a once-busy sea-port on the West coast) undergoes enormous changes in the course of time due to the 'modern civilization' that envelops the city after the 18th century. The British, Portuguese and Dutch sailors, on periodic commercial voyages, introduce the profession of prostitution and 'the disease of the white men' (venereal diseases) to the city of Basrur. Similarly, native young men have to sail for far off ports on business; and in such extended periods of loneliness and separation, their wives have to take recourse to the oldest profession. The novelist pictures such a situation in these words:

During the 17th century, the British, the Portuguese and the Dutch began to stay for long periods in the coastal cities for the sake of business. Since there used to be in the past a large number of weavers, there must have been a prosperous textile business in the past.

\* \* \*

Historically, among the many things imported by this city one was 'the disease of the white men!' Today, there



are no white men here; and their ships do not come even close to this city. But, it is a fact that once upon a time, those white faces were strong rivals for local pleasure-seekers.

\* \* \*

Among the many foreign sailors that visited (Basrur) most of them had become sailors to earn a livelihood. This kind of struggle for existence is not unknown even to the local people. Many of them go up the Ghats and beyond to make a living, and return to their families only once or twice in a year....In their extended periods of absence, what should their young wives do? Similar to the belly, minds and bodies also experience hunger. For how long can they be suppressed?

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It is no wonder if many such (lonely wives) were attracted by those sailors who came ashore only to have a good time and who, ignorant of local language, could only signal through their eyes and exhibit their purses. (1970 ; 1992 , p. 6-9)

On the second kind of sexuality that gets suppressed in the name of religion, Karanth has always been highly critical; he disapproves of any religious/moral codes that dictate total sexual abstinence and glorify bachelorhood. For, to Karanth, such suppression is both unnatural and unprofitable. Hence, Karanth satirises almost all kinds of monks and ochre-clothed religious leaders; and the monk, Lakshmana Thirtha is one such in this novel. He comes in secret to Manjula seeking those pleasures that are denied to him by his position. In fact, in response to Gandhiji's advocacy of Brahmacharya (bachelorhood), Karanth comments thus in one of his autobiographies:

"Gandhiji has no knowledge whatsoever of human nature; he thinks that whatever is possible for him is also possible for others."

Regarding the institution of marriage, an institution developed by society to regulate human sexuality, Karanth is ambivalent in this as in other novels. On the one hand, he is dissatisfied with the institution which completely ignores a woman's sexual urges; and hence he ridicules it in many of his novels from *Sarasamma Samadhi* (1937; 'The Grave of Sarasamma') to *Kevala Manushyaru* (1971; 'Only Humans'); and he sympathetically treats such women who, denied sexual pleasure within the marriage fold, seek it out in extra-marital affairs. Even in this novel, on one occasion, Manjula ridicules a loyal wife thus: "Don't I know what a wife's lot is! I wonder if those wives have anything else beyond working like donkeys... By the time a woman, battered in household chores since dawn, reaches her bed it is always midnight. What pleasure can such wives experience?" (p.112)

On the other hand, Karanth has respect for those that are loyal to each other in marriage. In fact, the ideal for Bhavani of the first generation is the life of a married and faithful woman; and it is the same ideal that Chandri of the fourth generation cherishes. Once Bhavani tells her daughter that "one has to be fortunate to become the legal wife of somebody; nobody admires a loyal wife for nothing."

Karanth can only sympathise with the fourth aspect of sexuality - the system of prostitution. Once upon a time, in the feudal society, prostitutes too were highly respected for their artistic accomplishments and culture. But in the modern world, they are the helpless victims of the male-oriented system, most

of them being driven to the profession by poverty. Whereas Manjula represents the past, her grand daughter stands for the future.

Despite such vivid and sensitive portrayal of a woman who yearns for total communion of the body and soul together, if we concentrated only on this aspect of the novel, we would be doing injustice to its many-sided achievement. In fact, what Karanth does in this novel is to document the varied strands of changes the Indian society went through over a period of one hundred years through the medium of changing attitudes to marriage and sex. In other words, *Mai Managala Suliya* also is a socio-cultural saga of modern India; and in this saga fine arts function as metaphors of social ethos.

Among fine arts, the most abstract and the most creative is music and Manjula adores music. Like Meera, Manjula finds fulfilment when she pours her soul out in music. Drama is more visual and concrete than music; and Sharada of the next generation is given to drama. She works for sometime as a professional actress in a drama-troupe. Whereas Manjula enthralls her audience with a composition of Meera, her daughter entertains her audience with popular songs from plays. Chandri of the last generation has interest neither in music nor in dance or drama. Whereas Manjula had been well-versed in Sanskrit literature, her grand daughter, Chandri, studies English literature. While Chandu contemporary of Manjula, was a competent carver of ivory and sandalwood figures, that very art is lost at the time of Chandri. For today there are no such persons who love to have expressive frescos on their walls or delicate figurines carved in ivory.

Thus, using the place of fine arts in society as a metaphor, Karanth registers deftly the impact of colonisation on the Indian society. English replaces Sanskrit as the language of

knowledge and prestige; cottage industries such as delicate ivory carving and manually woven textiles disappear from the scene; land-owning aristocrats, with an inborn love for fine arts give place to practical and calculative business men; self-sufficient villages give place to faceless cities and all these changes and transformations Karanth records dispassionately but sensitively.

Before we move on to the next category, we can briefly consider one more novel which brutally exposes the cruelty inherent in a feudal society and which registers its inevitable death. *Dharmarayana Samsaara* ('The House of Dharmaraya,' 1972) narrates the story of two generations of feudal landowners, Narayana Hebbar and his son Mahabalaiah. Interestingly, Karanth uses third person limited point of view in this novel. To start with, we see Narayana Hebbar from the point of view of his family priest, for whom Hebbar appears as a great achiever and as one given to a generous and charitable mind. Next, we see him as he appears to one of his neighbours, whose entire property is acquired by Hebbar through treachery and deceit. Later, we see Hebbar and his son from the position of Hebbar's wife, who is a helpless victim of patriarchy. She has not only to close her eyes to her husband's extra-marital affairs but also she has no say in any family matters including her daughter's marriage. The words in which she sums up her marital life offers a sad commentary on the position of a woman in a male-dominated society : "what I can do now is what I used to do earlier - when he (husband) was alive, I was like a broom in the kitchen; now the broom's place is shifted to the bathroom." (p.185)

The last section is narrated from the point of view of the victims - both men and women - of the father and son; and we realise with a shock the barbarity with which they, the father

and son, exploit their bonded labourers, and the contempt they display toward women, wives as well as field workers. In fact, the son outdoes his own father in his sadistic behaviour: he 'rapes' his own wife who is still an adolescent, and, later, he once forces her to witness his sexual onslaught on another woman. Such cruelty inherent in feudalism hits us all the more because, like a clever cameraman, the novelist begins with a long shot of his subject, then moves closer, and finally gives us a close-up shot, which is both revolting and terrifying.

Because of the nature of cruelty, exploitation, and violence that lie at the very centre of feudalism, it cannot survive for long and its end is inevitable. The father, Narayana Hebbar, despite all of his wealth and followers, meets a sudden death in a distant place, having not a soul near him in his last moment. The end of his son is more terrible and telling : when he once approaches the wife of one of his labourers to force himself upon her, he is brutally murdered by the couple:

Mahabalayya's body lay there, naked, like a dead piece of wood. His mouth had been stuffed and gagged; and his hands had been tied with one end of his own dhoti. .. His bare torso vividly told the story of the torture he had gone through. Because his private parts had been pressed hard, his testicles had swollen to the size of a wild gourd. (p.290)

The way in which Mahabalaiah meets his nemesis is a cutting commentary on Feudalism.

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### CHAPTER III

### MAJOR NOVELS - 2

### KUNSTLERROMAN AND POLITICAL SATIRES

#### A) KUNSTLERROMAN:

Kunstlerroman (or the 'Artist Novel') can be viewed as a sub-genre of Bildungsroman (or the 'Novel of Growth'). Since the artists, with their supreme competence in their chosen field and unconventional as well as passionate personal lives, have a great fascination for ordinary people, works about them have always been very popular with readers and audiences. Even if we limit ourselves to fiction in the 20th century, we find many memorable works in this category: Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*, James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist*, Somerset Maugham's *The Moon And Six Pence*, Irwing Stone's *Lust For Life* and *The Agony And Ecstasy*, etc.

Karanth also, like most other Kannada writers, has written many novels in which either the protagonist is an artist or concern for a particular art constitutes a major component. A few of Karanth's 'Artist-Novels' are *Moga Padedda Mana* (about a dancer 1948); *Swapnada Hole* (about operas and

playwrights, 1966); *Onti Dani*(about dancers and art-critics, 1966); and *Ileyemba* (about Theatre and a playwright, 1975). Also, Rama in *Marali Mannige* is a violinist, Manjula in *Mai Managala Suliyalli* is a classical singer, and Yashwanth Rao in *Alida Mele* is a painter. Since Karanth himself was involved in the theatre as actor-director-playwright-dancer for a very long time, it is not surprising that many of his novels deal with dancers and actors/playwrights. Karanth equates artists with intellectuals and sums up their role in society in these words :

Among those who can guide and correct a society, intellectuals stand very high. Always and in every country, those that have charted the path of progress for Man are contemporary intellectuals.

....(An intellectual) can place his considered opinions before others in many forms like speeches or writings; and through them can influence his listeners/readers. However, many ideas can be better and more effectively communicated through the medium of arts such as drama, dance and films. For, those arts (besides communicating ideas) appeal to one's emotions and sense of imagination.(*Smrithi*, 2:88)

In this context, we can recall that among Carlyle's 'heroes' the poet also is one, and that among Emerson's 'Representative Men' there are three writers: Shakespeare, Montaigne and Goethe.

In order to place Karanth's 'Artist-Novels' in the right perspective and appreciate his achievement in this genre, we can briefly consider such novels in Kannada by other writers. Almost all the major novelists of the first half of the 20th century wrote 'Artist-Novels.' A.N.Krishna Rao, the first professional writer in Kannada, wrote more than one hundred

novels, among which many belonged to this genre : *Sandhyaraga* and *Mia Malhar* (about singers), *Udayaraga* (about a painter), *Sahityarathna* (a series of four novels about writers), *Sangrama* (about a sculptor), and the most ambitious *Nata Sarvabhauma* (in 2 vols. about an actor). In fact, it was Krishna Rao (or 'Anakri' as he is widely known) who popularised - and also set up a model for - this genre. Most of the others followed his model.

The Artist-Novel, in the model set up by Krishna Rao, moves along these lines: there is a born artist - at the height of fame and glory, he is enslaved in his passion for a woman - his art suffers - in the end, either he overcomes his passion and reaches greater artistic heights or cannot overcome his passion and is destroyed as an artist. The point to be emphasised here is that there is no growth of the artist and the novel focuses throughout on his/her personal life and not on art. (Hence, even if we change the name of art practiced by the artist, it does not make much difference to the plot of the novel.) There is no serious analysis of the art form itself, of its possibilities and limitations. These comments apply, with a few minor qualifications, to the novels of other writers also in this group. However, it has to be added that Anakri's *Nata\_Sarvabhauma* appears to be an exception to the above comments. Based on the life of a great actor called Varadachar, though this long novel also follows the pattern of 'Genius - Surrender to Temptation - Fall - Rebirth, it does explore the possibilities of professional theatre; and, also, it documents the history of Kannada theatre from the beginning. In short, the popular tradition of the 'Artist-Novel' in Kannada can be called Romantic and illusionary. It was Karanth who infused Realism to this genre, and dealt with artists who are close to real life.



Maurice Beebe who defines this genre lists the following aspects of the genre:

- i) these novels throw light on the personality of an artist;
- ii) they explore the process in which a work of art is created;
- iii) and they seriously reflect on the relationship that exists or should exist between the Art/Artist and the society in which he lives.\*

Beebe uses three metaphors for those three aspects; Divided Self, Ivory Tower and Sacred Fountain. The metaphor of 'Divided Self' refers to the conflict between "the man who suffers" and "the artist who creates" (to use Eliot's words), between the individual who has to conform to the social/moral norms of his society and the artist in him who refuses to acknowledge any restraints and taboos other than those of his art. Whereas the 'Ivory Tower' symbolises the distance between the Art-world and the real world (roughly what can be called the classical tradition), the 'Sacred Fount' suggests that the Art-world cannot but be intimately rooted in the real world (what can be called the Realistic tradition). Against the background of this theoretical framework, we can now consider, in greater detail, the most representative 'Artist-Novel' of Karanth - *Moga Padedda Mana*.

*Moga Padedda Mana* ('Shaping of the Mind,' 1948) charts the growth of a dancer. The protagonist of the novel, Vyasa, born to a very poor family, is interested in dance from the beginning. Once, by chance, he comes in contact with a famous dancer, Indumati, joins her troupe, and learns the art of dance systematically. Very soon, due to his natural abilities, he achieves name and fame as a dancer. When Indumati, who is more of a

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\* See, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts : The Artist as Hero in Fiction*, 1964.

'show-girl' than an artist, deserts her troupe and joins the filmworld seeking money and glamour, Vyasa opens his own school of dance. Madam Tuba, a French artist, who has been with Indumati's troupe from the beginning, joins Vyasa; and both work hard to build up their school as a centre for genuine art. However, very soon, Vyasa has to close his school as he cannot cater to the low taste of the audience. Madam Tuba returns to her country and Vyasa returns to his place of birth, Udupi, and runs there a dancing school for children.

Throughout the novel, Karanth raises these questions and attempts to answer them against the rich background of his intimate experience with the theatre :

- a) *What is the nature of an artist?*
- b) *How does a work of art come into being?*
- c) *What is the role of art in a society?*

a) Regarding the nature of an artist, Karanth maintains it as a credo in this and other novels that mere professional competence or craftsmanship does not make an artist. An artist has to have within him the creative urge and rich imagination. Even as an adolescent, whenever Vyasa witnesses the performance of plays like *Hamlet* and *Othello*, though he is moved by them he goes beyond the particular performance and begins to contemplate on the possibilities of the theatre as a medium. His (and Karanth's) model is Charlie Chaplin, and like Chaplin he too desires to communicate the pain and anguish of the poor and the forsaken to the uncaring world and jolt it from its passivity.

But, before we proceed further, an immediate qualification to the above comments is called for. To Karanth commitment to life and commitment to a specific socio-political ideology are

clearly distinct from each other. His artist is not a prophet or revolutionary; basically, he is an explorer – one who explores the possibilities of life as well as a particular art as a medium. He makes this point very clear in his autobiography:

The medium of art is not born of revolutions; it needn't exist for any revolution.... The revolution in drama is not the revolution of social problems; it is a revolution to be achieved in the various aspects of drama such as dialogue, songs and dances, style of acting, and performance techniques. It is concerned with the relationship between the medium and the subject of its communication, and it is related to the growth of the particular medium to realise its maximum possibilities. (*Smrithi*, 1:163)

According to Karanth, an artist though not a supernatural being is one different from others. In the beginning of this novel we find Vyasa strolling or sitting on the sea-shore and contemplating on the ever rising and falling seawaves while others of his age are engrossed in games or different forms of entertainment. Even when he witnesses Indumati's dances on the stage, while others have their eyes glued to her youthful and attractive body and the spectacular stage-setting, he begins to wonder whether dance as a form of art can be completely separated from libidinous appeal. Primarily, an artist is a dreamer - a dreamer of new visions and novel forms of expression. One of the novels by Karanth is very appropriately titled *Swapnada Hole*, the 'River of Dreams,' the protagonist of which is a playwright. He writes an experimental opera, reinterpreting the story of Bhishma from *Mahabharatha*. After it is performed on the stage, a knowledgeable person in the audience meets the playwright and compliments him in these words: "Don't worry about your lack of knowledge regarding proper costumes and all

that. Truly, you are a dreamer; and, if you continue such experimentation, one day you will realise an unbroken dream." (p.285)

All the 'Artist-Novels' of Karanth (like those of A.N. Krishna Rao and T.R. Subba Rao) register the presence of the 'divided self' in an artist that Beebe comments upon. An artist is also a man/woman of flesh and blood; hence he/she is also driven by the basic urges of mankind like hunger and sex. Since he/she is forced by his/her profession to constantly live in a world of emotions and passions, it is well-nigh impossible for him/her to resist such temptations, especially of sex. Karanth calls an artist's life 'asidhara vratha' - the ritual of walking on the sword's sharp edge; the moment one loses concentration, one falls - often never to recover. Madam Tuba, a great dancer herself (in *Moga Padeda Mana*), explains this point very effectively:

We, the artists, are very weak people. We grow in the world of emotions; and unless an artist has the ability to experience intense emotions, he cannot survive as an artist. But it is the same ability to feel and respond intensely that makes our minds weak. Within no time, we get carried away by emotions and we become sentimental, as a result of which we lose our hold on Reason and Truth. (1967 edn., pp. 171 - 172)

In fact, Madam Tuba herself suffers again and again from her emotional entanglements. Vyasa also once loses the sight of his goal due to his fatal attraction for Indumati, but very soon he recovers and frees himself from his emotional bondage to her.

b) Regarding the nature of art and artistic expression, Karanth is a rebel, both in real life and in his works, against

Indian tradition and conventions. Vyasa, sick of orthodoxy in art, wonders sadly whether the art of dance in India could ever reach the heights of Anna Pavlova. Madam Tuba expresses Karanth's own views when she discusses Indian dance with Vyasa:

Rhythm is not a major means of expression in your classical forms of dance. Even the little there was has been totally neglected. Everything is classified and moulded, like language, into so many gestures and so many emotions. Consequently, there isn't much freedom either for the composer or the dancer. (p.107)

On another occasion, she declares in a similar vein that in India "professional competence has taken the place of art; and Tradition has become an All-powerful God." (pp. 111-112) The reason for Karanth's constant revolt against tradition and convention is that they prove an obstacle for an artist's self-expression; and his soul cries for freedom to explore new avenues and newer paths. Karanth maintains throughout that an artist should be constantly experimenting in his medium. Hence, Vyasa, imitating his creator's experiments in real life, conceives of a composition called 'Sagara Milana' ('Union with the Ocean'), which, modelled upon western ballets, attempts to take the art from individual to collective level.

That Karanth is a Romantic regarding creativity in art is borne out by another significant incident in the novel. One of Vyasa's most meaningful creations is what he calls 'Mayura Nrithya' or 'the Dance of the Peacock;' and this is how it takes shape in his mind. Once, on a rainy day in a place called Halasangi (a village in Karnataka where peacocks are protected), Vyasa witnesses a glorious scene of peacocks dancing around peahens; and it leaves an indelible impression on him. After a

few months, when he recollects that incident, he begins to consciously think of the ways in which he can communicate his intense experience to his audience. He divides the whole scene into certain segments and devises particular rhythm, steps and gestures for each segment. Finally, through constant meditation and experimentation, he creates an entire sequence called 'Mayura Nrithya.' We can recall here Wordsworth's famous definition of the origin of poetry involving 'Experience - Recollection - Recrudescence - Creation.'

c) Lastly, regarding the relationship between Art/Artist and society, Karanth's views again correspond to those of Wordsworth. (I need not add that I am here talking of 'correspondence' and not 'influence.'). According to Vyasa (and Karanth), a work of art should be concerned with common people, not gods and goddesses; and it should provide a voice for voiceless multitudes in the society. "Be it poetry or dance", once Vyasa asks himself, "shouldn't it express the pleasures and pains that the ordinary people experience in their daily life? Should it always depend upon the stories of Krishna and Radha? ... When human beings take the place of gods, and when service to people becomes service to Art, then, automatically, service to Art becomes service to God." Hence, Vyasa has contempt for unnecessary and extravagant costumes and stage-decorations. He wants to emulate Isadora Duncan who did not need artificial props for her art like rich costumes and dazzling stage-settings. Themes, language, and emotions of a work of art, be it poetry or drama or dance, should be as close to real life as possible. From this point of view, it is very clear that Karanth's artist can never be an aesthete, living in his own 'Ivory Tower'; on the contrary, he plunges himself headlong into the thick of the daily life of ordinary people.

As can be expected, Karanth, who holds such artists as Isadora Duncan and Charlie Chaplain as his ideals, has little sympathy for those who make up for their lack of originality with pomp, 'show, and publicity. In fact, Karanth detests show and mediocrity in art; and he is very sad about art and artists in the modern world who live and glory on publicity hype. His novel, *Onti Dani* ('The Lone Voice,' 1966), pointedly satirises such sham and pseudo artists. One of the major characters of the novel is Nayanathara, who has an international repute as a dancer. Wherever she goes, she flatters and cajoles people of influence and art-critics, and she projects herself as a dancer who interprets Indian spirituality to the West. In a press conference, she claims that she has opened the Western eyes to the fact that Indian Art is metaphysical, spiritual, and other-worldly. Newspapers build her up as the great ambassador of Indian Art. However, Jagannatha Rao, who is a sincere and competent art-critic, evaluates her thus:

Above all, an artist should be honest.... What exactly are our responses as Indians, to the union and separation of Krishna and Radha? This woman claims that she has realised the soul of India, and that she has touched the depths of metaphysics through the medium of dance. Did her performance reveal those depths?...

We Indians begin our lives with self-deception. Tell me, don't we find words like 'physical' and 'metaphysical' in every language?... Why should we play upon words, talking about the spirituality of an art-medium when we lack it ourselves? (p.50)

Jagannatha Rao is fully aware of the fact that in a world of hypocrisy, pomp, and publicity, full of fake artists and

ignorant public, his is a 'lone voice.' But, like Karanth, he values honesty as the highest principle in art and in life, and is proud to be a 'lone voice.'

## **(B) POLITICAL NOVELS :**

If we construct the sub-genre called Political Novel on the lines suggested by Irwing Howe\* two groups of Kannada novels, written in the 20th century fall in this category: those that have an epoch, the National Struggle for independence, at the centre, and those that satirically depict the post- independence Indian society. Literally, there are scores of novels in both the groups. Karanth has written one novel against the background of the Independence Movement and as many as six novels that can be called political satires.

*Audaryada Urulalli* (1945; 'In the Noose of Generosity'), the first political novel of Karanth, pictures the critical period of the National Movement, roughly from 1921 to 1942. It is a long novel of more than six hundred pages and documents some of their major incidents and principal political leaders of Karnataka during those two decades. The protagonist of the novel (which is partly autobiographical) is one Radhakrishna who, along with his friends, quits college in response to Gandhiji's call. Though his friends desert him very soon, undaunted, he continues to participate in the Movement. At this juncture, he meets a great freedom fighter, Dayananda Rao, and comes under his influence. Following his leadership, Radhakrishna moves from house to house to collect subscription for the Congress Fund, and from one place to another to give lectures on 'Swadeshi,' non-cooperation, and abstinence from alcohol. He opens an

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\* *Politics and the Novel*. New York : Horizon press, 1967; p. 16 - 17



ashram and struggles to make it self-sufficient. During a flood in Kundapura, he gathers a group of volunteers and works day and night to rehabilitate the flood-victims. He also actively participates in the Salt-Sathyagraha movement of the Thirties. But he realises that, gradually, great and dedicated leaders like Dayananda Rao are pushed to the background; and hypocritical as well as selfish people are taking over the leadership. Finally, when he realises that even the money to run his vocational school comes from lotteries sold in other States, he is totally disillusioned. The novel comes to an end with these words of Radhakrishna: "For a nation to become great, people in our towns and villages should be great. But that is what I don't find today. What is the use of our pride in our country when our character itself is flawed?"

*Audaryada Urulalli* is a notable work for many reasons. To start with, it is mostly autobiographical; and, consequently, the incidents and other particulars are so authentic that they move us even today. They faithfully document the various kinds of social work and rural reconstruction that Karanth undertook after he left the college. Secondly, the novel gives us a very touching portrait of one dedicated Congress leader of those days, Karnad Sadashiva Rao, in the character of Dayananda Rao. Sadashiva Rao was born to a very affluent family and, when he became a follower of Gandhiji, he sacrificed all his resources to the National Cause. Literally, the title of the novel 'In the noose of generosity,' refers to Karnad; and in his autobiography also Karanth has this to say on Karnad :

The acknowledged leader of the district, Karnad Sadashiva Rao, visited Kundapura frequently. I was very close to him. It is through him that I made the acquaintance of the political life of wider Karnataka.

I have painted an indirect portrait of Karnad in my *Audaryada Urulalli*. No one had taken Gandhiji's slogan 'Swaraj within a year' more seriously than he. His disappointment when the year ended is indescribable. He was a very gullible person. He gave away all his property to others and brought upon himself the plight of having to live in others' largess. (*Ten*, p.37)

Once his wealth dwindled, Karnad (Dayananda Rao in the novel) was sidelined and later totally ignored by the other Congress leaders in Karnataka.

One of the serious questions that this novel raises (repeated in his later novels) is related to the nature and function of democracy in a country like India. For democracy to successfully function, the electorate has to be educated and responsible. But in India (then) the majority of the people is both ignorant and illiterate. Can it really exercise, Karanth asks, its right of franchise and choose the right people for right positions? One of the characters in the novel voices Karanth's own view in this matter: "Our duty is to give the people proper political education. We have to create our own leaders, not blindly follow the self-proclaimed leaders." (P. 294)

One of the major characters in the novel is one Prabhudeva, who appears under different names in many other novels of Karanth. Prabhudeva claims that he belongs to Leftist ideology, runs a periodical called 'Kempu Thare' ('Red Star') given to mostly sensationalism and scandal-mongering, and is a leader of workers' unions. In the beginning, Radhakrishna is attracted to him by his professed ideas and ideals of an egalitarian society; but he soon realises that Prabhudeva is as much a selfish and hypocritical leader as the others in the Congress. When he comes

to know that Prabhudeva organises labour-strikes in various factories only to win elections and make money, Radhakrishna breaks away from him completely.

The tone of the novel throughout is one of despair, bordering on cynicism. Once, a normative character, Dr.Nadakarni, attempts to assuage the feelings of depression in Radhakrishna, pointing out that since Man is a part of the earth and the contours of the Earth are never straight, Man also reflects that characteristic. "Simplicity and Truthfulness are only exceptions, not rules," concludes the doctor. But, unimpressed, Radhakrishna adds:

what you say is true; the movement of the planets and stars in the universe is never straight. Even the direction of light is said to be curved. But there is a system in such non-straight movement and it can be measured. But the crooked nature of Man is beyond understanding. Its crookedness is many-sided; and hence it is impossible to trust it.(P. 397)

Crooked human nature - self-seeking politicians - wicked trade-union leaders - corrupt electoral practices - ignorant and uncaring common people - these are the recurring motifs and character-patterns of all the later political novels of Karanth. They differ from *Audaryada Urulalli* in that they are more virulent in their expose and more disillusioned in their tone.

*Gondaranya* ('Dense Jungle,' 1954) satirises the political developments immediately after independence, in a princely state called Gondaranya. It contrasts two types of post-independence politicians: Arunachaliah who is principled, sincere and honest; and Vamana Rao who is hypocritical, selfish, and corrupt. After independence, Vamana Rao succeeds the King and assumes the reins of power. But, being tired of his corrupt practices, in the

next election people choose Arunachaliah as their leader. He works hard and honestly as chief minister for the welfare of the people. But, halfway through his regime, he is murdered by his opponents; and his successor, Kanchanamala also becomes a victim of self-seeking people.

*Moojanma* (1974; *Three Lives*) is a more interesting work in its theme and narrative technique. It begins with the present (post-independence period) and then reconstructs the past of the protagonist, bit by bit. The protagonist is one Chandrakanth Gupta, a veteran freedom-fighter. After independence, he shuns all power and position, and works hard for the welfare of the people. Unfortunately, his opponents who cannot tolerate his influence in the political sphere, get him murdered. After his death, his wife desires to write his biography; and begins to meet various people related to her husband directly or indirectly. After prolonged research, finally, she realises that her husband had been a school-teacher and a married man earlier, that he had left his wife and become a terrorist during the Quit-India Movement, and that later he had settled in a faraway province and worked for the good of the people. Thus the novel ends with an account of the 'three lives' of a politician.

The novel tackles a very important issue of modern-day politics : the rift between private and public morality. Can one, despite being dishonest and immoral in private life, be a good politician and do something really good for the society? And, how do we evaluate him? As far as Karanth is concerned, the answer is clear. He, like Gandhi, does not accept any kind of rift between public and private morality. He makes his position clear in these words: "I need to know the total personality of an individual. If personal integrity doesn't match his intentions, I uphold neither his leadership nor his humanity." (*Smrithi*, 2:97)

But many, I am sure, may not so easily agree with Karanth today.

The other three novels - *Ade Ooru, Ade Mara* (1977; 'The Same Town, The Same Tree'), *Naavu Kattida Swarga* (1980; 'The Heaven that we have Built'), and *Nashta Diggajagalu* (1983; 'The Lost Eight Pillars') - are more discursive but reach similar conclusions. Very roughly, Karanth's views on the political system prevailing in the post-independence India can be summed up as follows;

i) The electorate being mostly illiterate and poor, the democratic system, based on different political parties and their ideologies, has failed in India. Elections, being fought on caste-language-regional considerations, have become mechanical and meaningless.

ii) The political system as well as the bureaucracy being totally corrupt, honest and principled people cannot win the elections and come to power; even if they do come to power, they can not survive. Honest and committed leaders like Arunachaliah (in *Gondaranya*) and Chandrakantha Gupta (in *Moojanma*) are brutally murdered; and only self-seeking leaders get into and retain power.

"What we have brought you is not Ramarajya but 'harami rajya' (degenerate nation)", Devendrappa, an honest and elder statesman, declares sadly on Gandhi Jayanthi in *Naavu Kattida Swarga*. "The freedom that we enjoy today," says another character in *Moojanma*, "is not earned by us; we got it as a matter of our right."

iii) Karanth is very critical of such 'socialist' policies of the government as Nationalisation of banks and industries, Land-redistribution, and Reservation. Chandradevi, in

*Moojanma* says, "'To help ten people one can be harmed' - this seems to be the accepted principle today. ... To loot one and give it to another in charity is not real upliftment of the poor. It is not justice."

Still more directly, Karanth attacks the 'Land Reforms' in these words;

Whether our wealth is in the form of salaries, or bank-deposits, or land, its value is the same. If only the land-owners are targetted and their wealth has to be re-distributed among others, the society has to pay them (the land owners) the value of their entire wealth. ... Daylight robbery cannot go by the name of socialism.  
(*Naavu Kattida Swarga*, Preface)

Similarly, a character in *Ade Ooru, Ade Mara* analyses the principle of land-distribution thus:

Look here, why this penalty only for the land-owners: Now, there are many government officers who are paid thousands as their salary. There are others who, getting only a hundred or two, struggle to make both ends meet. On the basis of the same principle, why not scale down the salary of all those officers and fix a limit on one's salary as on one's land-holdings? (p.261)

In short, all these political novels mirror the utter disappointment and despair of Karanth (and many other contemporary writers) resulting from contemporary political scene. Karanth felt the degradation of the present-day political leaders to such an extent that, in this *Autobiography* written in the Nineties, he bemoans: "Worry about the country's good has robbed me of my mental peace. What can a writer like me do for the country? Can I buy the support of a flock of votes?"

I begin to feel that it matters little if a writer like me lives or dies." (*Ten* p.183)

It is easy to dismiss Karanth's views on Nationalisation or Land Redistribution as conservative and traditional. But, what we have to realise here is that Karanth's critique of the political-economic system in post-independence India is based on a strong political philosophy. Karanth's political-economic philosophy can be seen as a blend of Gandhian notion of individual morality and the Liberal Humanism of the West developed by Bentham and John Stuart Mill. A high sense of morality, strong Individualism, Laisses-faire economic philosophy, and 'Scientific Religion' - these are the features that shape Karanth's worldview, underlying all of his novels, Reformist novels as well as Political novels.

One of the obvious corollaries of such a Liberal philosophy is a distrust of Radicalism; and Karanth had a deep-rooted distrust of all shades of 'Socialist Activities' - communists, Trade Union leaders, and Left-oriented philosophers. This is the reason why, in most of his novels, communists and Trade Union leaders appear as villains. They are pictured as those who always look toward (the then) Moscow, and who, as individuals, are always unprincipled, self-centered, and hypocritical. Organized protests and strikes, be they of any kind and for any reason, are always ridiculed in his novels. Karanth retained such political views till the very end of his life. In one of the extended interviews, conducted by G.Rajashekara (a socialist thinker) in 1993, Karanth elaborates and justifies his position vis-a-vis Socialism in these words:

Those who cannot see what is happening in Poland today cannot see anything in the rest of the world.

I have gone through the entire literature of the Labour Party; and I have met those who have escaped from Russia. Owing to their illusory sense of equality, there is a greater exploitation today in Russia than anywhere else in the world, either in the past or the present. ... To me a value is an individual's value. In the past there were poor people of all the castes; but they led an honourable life. ... Whatever problems they had, they kept up their word. That is value to me. I have never accepted the principle that because one is poor, one can steal from others. (*Karantha Manthana*, p.474)

Despite Karanth's personal honesty and integrity, despite his strong sense of puritan work ethics, Karanth failed to realise that Individualism, if upheld as a sacrosanct principle, can in practice turn out to be another form of tyrannical capitalism. There is no way one can justifiably impose the Liberal philosophy, which developed in an industrialised and highly prosperous West, on the Indian society marked by heartless extremes in terms of wealth, education, and social position. Sadly, Karanth was never ready to accept this harsh truth.

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There are quite a few novels of Karanth that can aptly be described as *sui generis*; they do not easily fit into any category. Among such novels, the two major ones are *Bettada Jeeva* ('The Man of the Hills,' 1943) and *Alida Mele* ('After one's death,' 1960).

*Bettada Jeeva* is an unusual novel in the sense that it does not contain any story as such. Rather, it is the indepth study of an extraordinary and adventurous spirit. Gopalayya, the protagonist of the novel, decides, against the advice of all the



others, to live in a dense forest, and turn it into a place suitable for agriculture. The place he chooses to work is by the side of the awesome Western Ghats, notorious for continuous rains, wild animals, and malaria. However, against all odds he and his wife finally succeed in raising a coconut grove there and paddy fields. Of their two children, the daughter dies in an early age and the son, equally strong-willed, leaves them to go somewhere else seeking a different occupation and a different kind of life. Unable to bear their loneliness, the husband and wife adopt an orphan, bring him up and get him married, and settle the couple in a place nearby.

The novel can be read as a record of the struggle, as ancient as it is modern, between Man's indomitable courage against harsh and daunting Nature. From this point of view, it belongs to the category of novels like Knut Hamson's *Growth of the Soil*\* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* - novels that pay homage to the unconquerable spirit of Man. As the narrator wonders, "(Here) every mountain peak has raised its head high like a demon; and mocks at the five-foot tall man, who looks like an ant beside it. If one were to challenge such gigantic mountains and attempt to establish his independence, could one achieve victory?"

Challenging such mountain-peaks and wild beasts like elephants who can trample and reduce one's year-long labour to nought in an hour, and tigers who on any night can creep into one's cattleshed and carry away cows and calves, Gopalayya does survive and does succeed in his task - but only partially. Ironically, what defeats him is not wild Nature but alien Culture in the form of English education.

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\* S. Anantha Narayana, *Kararanthara Kadambarigalu*. Mysore : Usha Sahitya Male, 1948, p.42.

The complete divide between generations, traditions, and value-systems, caused by the colonial rule and the colonial institutions is a constant preoccupation of Karanth. We have already seen how sensitively he treats this theme in *Marali Mannige* and *Mai Managala Suliyalli*. Even in this novel we find a similar divide between the older and the younger generations - between Gopalayya and his son Shambhu - caused by English education. The way Gopalayya describes this divide is very similar to the way Rama Aithal talks of his son Laccha in *Marali Mannige*:

Look, do you remember how the price of beetlenut shot up after the (World) War? Then, at once, the entire Havyaka community went mad over English. This boy was born to me much later, when all of his friends were going to Puttur and Mangalore to have English education. Thoughtlessly, I also admitted my son to an English school.

...

We believe that whatever we do is for our children; and that they should carry on the work here after us. It is only an illusion. How many Brahmin children haven't deserted, after their education, their homes and hearths? Is it proper to desire that all of them should return here to cultivate land? Once upon a time, acquisition of land and property was respectable; and, accordingly, we acquired land and property. But, today, English commands more respect and we taught our son English. Once in a while, I do feel that I shouldn't have sent him to an English school for the fear that he wouldn't return to farming. But, then, can I be sure that, had

I kept him at home, he wouldn't sell away all the property and settle down in a city? (*Bettada Jeeva*, pp.104-105)

When a novelist chooses to deal with the theme of an adventurous but pious father and his son who deserts him, he faces a two-fold problem: he may, unconsciously, identify himself with the father and glorify him, turning his son into a villain; or, he may identify himself with the son and depict him as a rebel against the conservative and outmoded lifestyle of his father. Karanth brilliantly solves this problem by eschewing his usual 'third person omniscient narration' and introduces a dramatised narrator.

The narrator is one Shivaramaiah, a stranger to Gopalayya and his wife; and, once on his journey, he loses his way and is led to the couple's home by some villagers. In his likes and dislikes, he is totally different from 'the man of the hills.' He is a city-dweller who, for the sake of novelty, may spend a week or two in the forest but not for long. He honestly confesses to Gopalayya once: "Maybe, I feel so because I am born in a city..... But, this much is certain: a man like me, even if he were offered one hundred rupees a month, couldn't live here even for a period of six months." The narrator mocks the adventurous spirit so much that Gopalayya's lifelong efforts appear rather futile to him. "If one invests so much of money on this god-forsaken place," he wonders, "could one expect any returns? All these efforts and hardships seem to me nothing more than the thoughtless acts of a courageous man?"

With the use of such a narrator, Karanth frees his novel (and his readers) from simplistic judgments. The narrator has respect and admiration for the old couple and he succeeds in

communicating the same feelings to the readers. At the same time, he, being different from Gopalayya, can also understand and appreciate the son's desire to lead the kind of life of his own choice. In other words, to the social historian in Karanth, there is neither any treachery nor degradation in what has taken place in the life of Gopalayya; it is the inevitable result of Time's inexorable movement, causing an upheaval of traditions, customs, and values.

One of the most discussed novels of Karanth, next only to *Marali Mannige*, is *Alida Mele*. ('After One's Death' 1960) It is, again, not a typical novel in the sense that the novelist is not interested in telling a story here. On the contrary, he closely examines, in this novel, the life of an unusual and eccentric individual. More importantly, it is an attempt, at the metaphysical level, to examine and evaluate a man's life after his death. The novel seeks an answer to this question: what is it that one leaves behind after one's death?

The novel begins after the death of a wealthy man called Yashavantha Rao, an acquaintance of the narrator, Karanth. The narrator goes to Bombay, collects all the belongings of his friend, and takes up the responsibility of disposing of his friend's wealth and property according to his wishes. He also finds a diary of his friend from which he learns much about his friend's early life; and he reconstructs the rest meeting Yashavanth's relatives, friends, and beneficiaries.

The narrator comes to know that his friend was born into a rich family, but lost everything due to his simple and trusting nature. Even his married life was not a happy one. Embittered with all this, Yashavant reached Bombay, settled down there, and, owing to his hard work and intelligence soon he became rich again. Since he had lost faith with most of the

people around him, he had very few friends whom he could trust, and the narrator was one such.

In order to piece together the scattered strands of Yashavanth's life, when the narrator meets many people, he is surprised by the widely conflicting responses to Yashwanth. If the orphan boy whom Yashavanth brought up finds him selfish and arrogant, and his mistress, Mary, concludes that he is a cheat, Yashavanth's wife and son accuse him of having irresponsibly abandoned them. But, a few others find him loving, generous, and warm-hearted. What we, readers, gather from these multiple and conflicting views on Yashavanth's life is that when he was alive, he was no saint. He was a man of intense passions and extreme likes and dislikes. He was not born so, but his unhappy experiences made him a very unconventional and self-centred man; yet, he retained a warm heart throughout.

It is in this context that we realise Karanth's astute craftsman-ship. If he were to tell the story of Yashvant from an omniscient, third person point of view, Yashvant would have been a repelling character. Hence, Karanth creates a narrator who is dramatised and sympathetic to his friend. Only such a narrator, who is almost an alter-ego of the protagonist, can make his audience/readers fully understand the complex character of Yashvant. However, we have to bear in mind that the narrator Karanth (who narrates the story in First Person) is different from both the Implied Author of the work and the real author. Confusion regarding the nature of such a narrator has made many critics to charge that the novel champions "reactionary and life-thwarting values."\*

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\* See D.V.K. Murthy, *Jeevana Mauliyagalu Mattu Sahitya*. Mysore : D.V.K. Murthy, 1986. p. 121

In order to clarify these points, we can compare this novel with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's novel also, the narrator Marlowe undertakes a journey to meet and understand Kurtz, who is a bundle of contradictory values such as the missionary zeal, love for fellow human beings, cruelty and terror, greed and selfishness. Marlowe, being very sympathetic to Kurtz is not a reliable narrator always. Often, he goes out of his way to defend Kurtz (as in the famous outburst beginning with "you can't understand. How could you?..."). The point is, his audience being a group of financially secure and socially well-placed people (company directors, bank officers, etc.), there is no way they can fully understand Kurtz and appreciate if not admire the extraordinary circumstances under which he worked unless the narrator Marlowe laid bare all these facts.

The narrator of *Alida Mele* is similar to Marlowe and not always reliable. He is a social prig who always travels first class in order to avoid meeting common people; and he calculates everything in terms of profit and loss. He comments on the behaviour of Dada, an orphan boy brought up by Yashvant: "Then, he is like a thing bought at a very high price, isn't he?" When he comes to know of the illicit relationship between Yashvant and Mary, he takes it in his stride as something very natural; but when he hears of a similar relationship between Yashvanth's wife and another married man, he is shocked and he remains speechless for a long time.

When such a narrator lays before us the life of a man of intense passions, we both understand him and judge him; we understand the suffering on his part and we also judge him for his bitterness toward humanity. Finally, we agree with the narrator that "in all respects, what Yashvanth gave the society

was much more than what he received from it." That is what a meaningful life is, according to Karanth.

*Sameeksha* (1956; 'Overview/Evaluation) is another novel that poses similar questions: what makes life meaningful? Is it success or power or position? Or, is it something different from all these?

To find answers to the above questions, the novel examines the lives of one Srinivas and four of his friends. The novel begins at a point when all the five friends, idealists in their college days, are old; and Srinivas decides to meet all of them again and find out what they have done with their lives. Of his four friends, one joins the National Movement soon after leaving college and is involved in it for many years. Then, frustrated with political hypocrisy and corruption, he takes up the path of violence to set right the wrongs of society. The second friend wastes his life, bemoaning for the moral lapses on the part of his sister. While the third one acquires wealth and property and lives on exploitation, the fourth one deserts his old parents, goes to a distant place and becomes a 'holy man'. He has a large number of devotees and followers. The only normative character in the novel is Srinivasa, who always thinks of others and tries to help them going out of his way. He adopts and brings up an orphan child; he undertakes a prolonged legal battle to secure justice to a poor man; and he nurses his sick friend till he gains sanity.

Karanth despises, the novel establishes, ill-gotten wealth and power. He despises more vehemently escape from responsibility and pseudo-spirituality. He has serious doubts about Idealism also. For, a total commitment to abstract principles can harden a man's heart and rob him of all of his humane feelings.

(His idealist friend advises his wife, who is raped by Policemen, to commit suicide and thus put an end to her 'polluted' life.)

What Karanth upholds, as a man and as a novelist, are feeling for others, honesty, and forgiveness. The people he admires are not saints and holy men but simple, honest and hard-working people who contribute their humble bit to alleviate the suffering of others. Karanth repeatedly stresses that it is our ability to understand and forgive others' lapses that makes us human; and that rigid moral or ethical judgments turn human beings into heartless machines. What survives one's death is an acute sense of fellow-feeling and love for one's fellows, however low or fallen they be.

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## CHAPTER IV

### PLAYS, TRAVELOGUES AND DISCURSIVE WRITINGS

#### (A) PLAYS :

Karantb began his illustrious literary career with a play (*Nisha Mahime*, 1921), and his interest as well as involvement in the theatre continued, in one form or another, throughout his life. It is a pity that the fame he achieved as a novelist has overshadowed his theatrical achievements. Malini Mallya, the authoritative bibliographer of Karantb, lists as many as 97 plays written by Karantb;\* and among these, even if we ignore the skits and farces written for school children, Karantb's contribution to the Kannada theatre is of considerable significance. Again, Karantb's involvement in the theatre was total: not only did he script the plays but also scored music, choreographed the dance-sequences, directed the plays, and acted in most of them. His theatrical gifts were astounding, to say the least.

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\* *Kinnaraloka*, 1995.

Karant's plays are notable for their variety and diversity; and experimentation was the very breath of his creativity. He wanted to explore all possible ways of expression through the medium of theatre. His theatrical corpus includes plays of purpose, historical plays and parodies/pageants, shadow plays, operas and ballets, and translations. Due to lack of space, we can consider here only the most notable among them.

Karant began his theatrical career with what can be called 'problem plays' or 'plays with a purpose'; and, at this stage, he wanted to use the theatre as a means of social reform. The first such play was *Nisha Mahime* ('The Power of Alcoholism'), an adaptation of a (then) famous Marathi play *Ekach Pyala* by Gadkari. It was a message-oriented play on the manifold harms caused by alcoholism; and Karant himself both directed the play and took the role of Taliram, the alcoholic, in the play. It was staged first in 1921 at Kundapur; and, owing to its popularity, it was taken up later by a professional troupe called Amba Prasadika Mandali and was performed in different parts of Karnataka.

The other plays that belong to this sub-genre are: *Garbhagudi* ('The Sanctuary,' 1932); *Dumingo* (1928); *Drishti Sangama* ('The View-points Meet,' 1936); *Bevarige Jayavagali* ('Victory to Sweat,' 1930); *Suleya Samsara* ('The Prostitute's life,'), etc. These and such other plays dramatise contemporary problems with overt preaching; both *Garbhagudi* and *Dumingo* deal with the problem of untouchability, and the hypocritical behaviour of the so-called 'upper caste.' (In fact, a few years later, Karant adapted *Dumingo* as a silent movie also.) *Drishti Sangama* juxtaposes the points of view of orthodox and modern women, and in the end shows the

orthodox women seeing eye to eye with the younger generations that they are not destined to be subservient to men and to mutely suffer. *Bevarige Jayavagali* has a blind woman as its protagonist, who organises the workers of a particular factory and opposes its tyrannical owner. In the end, everyone including the factory owner realises that the days of money and exploitation are over and that the future belongs to workers. *Suleya Samsara* points out that prostitution is the inevitable result of helpless women. The play, an adaptation of an earlier novel by Karanth himself, pictures the suffering of a young-widow, who, ill-treated by everyone because she is a widow, is driven to prostitution. The play ends when an old customer comes to her and she recognises in him her own father. As a result, she commits suicide and her father goes into a swoon.

Although the problem-plays were a huge success on the stage, very soon Karanth realised that they suffered from being overtly didactic, and that he could not reform a society solely through the theatre. "I was disillusioned with the idea of using the dramatic form as an instrument of reform," says Karanth in one of his autobiographies and continues;

After a close examination of the professional troupes I knew that they were least interested in such an objective. .... (Also) I came to understand the distance between art and propaganda. When the playwright's mind is in the grip of an idea, when he conceives a passion for an ideology, he tends to make everyone of the characters disgorge the same doctrine. Even if the ideas are honest, even if the situations are appropriate, the characters will not be convincing. (*Ten*, pp.65-66)

After the first phase of problem-plays, there began a series of experiments with theatrical forms. One such experimental form was 'Shadow-Play'; and many plays of Karanth including *Devi Dehi* (1935) and *Rakta Kanike* (1936) belong to this category. As Karanth explains in his autobiography, in a 'Shadow-Play' there is a plain white curtain, completely covering the front of the stage. Behind there is a very powerful lamp. Preferably, a condensor can be used in front of the lamp. Actors, actresses, and other stage accessories like chariots and horses move behind the curtain, and their shadows are cast on the screen. Only profiles are seen on the screen and movement becomes an essential part of enactment. (*Smrithi*, 1:234)

What are the advantages of such a 'Shadow-Play'? They are many, according to Karanth. First, production of any scene becomes inexpensive as crowns, dresses and such other pieces of equipment can be prepared using thick and hard paper. More importantly, since the shadows on the screen can be made to appear bigger or smaller in size as the actors/actresses/accessories move near or farther from the screen, supernatural and mythical characters/scenes can be represented very effectively. Also, using coloured glasses in front of the lamp, very appropriate atmosphere for different emotions can be evoked. Again, since what the spectator sees are only shadows in different postures, he also becomes an active participant in dramatic expression, not a passive consumer. However, such representation makes a greater demand on the actors and actresses also since their delivery of dialogue has to be very clear and precise, and their dresses have to be very tight so that their silhouettes are sharply visible.

Before we move on to a detailed consideration of Karanth's operas and ballets, we can briefly discuss another experiment - the pageants or tableaux. In such plays, called 'natya-roopa-chitra' by Karanth, actors mime and dance to suit the songs sung behind the curtain; and often Karanth himself provided such 'background music.' As Karanth recalls, these plays proved more forceful and effective than the plays in the realistic mode. Some of the plays presented in this form are *Shahajahanana Kone* (The last Days of Shahajahan), *Bauddha-Yatre* (The Journey of Buddhism), and *Dehaliya Daurbhagya* (The Misfortune of Delhi). *Bauddha-Yatre* (to give an idea of the substance of such plays) begins with the first great Teacher of non-violence, Buddha; then he is followed by Ashoka, the only emperor who renounced wars after a victory. Ashoka is followed by Jesus Christ who died so that others may live. Then we see a few Chinese travellers to India like Fa Hi En who spread Buddhism in China. Lastly, we see Gandhi who comes upon the scene to re-enact and establish the principles of Buddhism - love, non-violence, and truth.

Opera or a musical-play (called 'Geetha Naataka' in Kannada) is of Western origin. It first took shape in Italy in the 17th century and then, in the 18th century, it reached great heights in Germany, in the hands of Richard Wagner. The comic variation of the opera became very popular in England in the compositions of Gilbert and Sullivan in the Victorian period. Like many other new forms of art and literature, opera came to India with English education, in the latter part of the 19th century.

However, a few qualifications for the above statement are called for. Although the modern opera or 'Geetha Naataka'

is of Western origin, it is not totally new either to Karnataka or India. As Srinivasa Udupa points out, compositions like *Prahlada Bhakti Vijaya* by the great musician-saint Tyagaraja and *Rama Nataka* by Arunachala Kaviraya are good examples of 'musical plays.'<sup>\*</sup> But they are totally devotional, with an appeal to only one sentiment, 'Bhakti,' throughout. Also, primarily, they are music compositions in the classical style. Again, Yakshagana, the most popular 'musical-dance-drama' of the West coast of Karnataka, has all the qualities of an opera; as it developed in course of time, prose-dialogue began to dominate the performace overshadowing its other aspects.

It was Karanth who introduced the opera, as we understand it today, to the Kannada theatre in the 1930s. His *Geetha Natakagalu*, published in 1946, contains nine operas that had been successfully staged earlier. Another writer of operas in Kannada is the great poet P.T.Narasimhachar (popularly known as 'Puthina'), whose compositions like *Ahalya* and *Gokula Nirgamana* are justly famous. Unfortunately, this form ceased to be a major concern of both the writers and the audience in the post-independence Karnataka, mainly for two reasons: the novel arose as the most popular form, pushing all other forms to the background; and the opera was a very demanding form on the part of both writers and actors : it required not only expertise in music but also in stagecraft, and the actors also had to be proficient in both singing and acting.

As Karanth rightly points out, an opera is not drama interspersed with music, neither is it a string of songs.

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<sup>\*</sup> "Geetha Nataka Prayoga", in *Karantha Prapancha*, p. 290.

According to him, an entire scene is one musical structure. "Both the text and song form," says Karanth, "contribute to the full meaning. The musical form carries with it the notation in terms of Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, and also the prose into notations as in a dialogue. The success in performance depends on using both those characteristics."\* He maintains that one cannot change the musical structure without detriment to the architecture of the play.

Against this theoretical background, we can now briefly consider a few of Karanth's operas. The collection published in 1946 (*Geetha Natakagalu*) contains nine operas of which seven are serious or 'Grand operas' (*Muktadwara*, *Kisagothami*, *Buddhodaya*, etc.) and the other two are comic operas (*Yaro Andaru* and *Badukabahudu*). Among the serious operas, five are based on mythology and legends and the remaining are fictional. Let us consider a few in detail.

*Mukta Dwara* (The Open Door) reveals different ages in the history of mankind illumined by great prophets and seers. The play begins with total darkness on the stage; and the chorus sings, behind the curtain, about the state of 'nothingness' :

....

Could it be called night? Where is Night without  
Light?

Who knows Light? Why should there be Night?

Why darkness? What is the state of 'Nothing'?

Who has the knowledge what 'Is'?

There is no 'I' and there is no 'you'; there is  
neither today or yesterday;

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\* *Karantha Prapancha*, p.279

There is no land to set foot on; there is no soul  
to make you stand;  
There is nothing that exists; there is no Creator;  
There is none to voice the state of nothingness.

*(Geetha Natakagalu , p. 61- 62)*

After this song, there emerges a wave of Light; and, after some time, slowly, emerges 'Hiranyagarbha' out of that Light. Then, the world comes into being with all forms of life, moving, singing, moaning. Then we see six prophets coming on to the stage and delivering their sermon to the world: Yagnavalkya, Krishna, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. But, very soon, the Brahmins, Bhikkus, Mullas and Priests begin to war among themselves claiming Truth only for their religions. Finally, a scientist comes upon the scene; and persuades all the warring factions to follow him on the path visible through the 'open Door' - the door to the Truth opened by Yagnavalkya and others.

Each prophet/sage in the play represents one particular age; and we see one age yielding place to another in the course of time. The ages represented are: the ages of Upanishaths, Mahabharatha (or the Age of the Gita), Buddhism, Christianity. and Islam. The play tells us that the modern age is the Age of Science and Reason. Today, the scientist has to take on himself the roles of seers and prophets, and lead the world out of darkness into Light.

The most significant aspect of this play is the character of Time, who, periodically, sends one age to oblivion and causes another age to emerge. Consequently, after each age in the play, we see Time dancing to the accompaniment of background music and songs. Each appearance of Time on the



stage conveys a different function and a different mood. Thus we see Time six times in the play, as a potter's wheel ('Kaala Chakra'), as a Giant Bird ('Kaala Pakshi'), as a huge snake ('Kaala Sarpa'), as an embodiment of creativity ('Kaala Shristi'). It is the character of Time that brings together all the different scenes and gives them meaning. The chorus describes Time at the end of the play in these words:

The Time-God returns, once again;  
 A new dream does he weave and nourish.  
 A new world, a new creation does he bring;  
 He leaps beyond the reach of our minds.  
     O Actor called Time! Your sport  
     And your dreams - are terrible.  
     Birth and death, creation and destruction -  
     These are your very breath and spirit.  
 The swirling waters of your passion,  
 That flow beyond the confines of our hearts,  
 How can we grasp them and feel them,  
 Unless we meet you and merge with you.

The concept of Time and his role in the opera are so crucial that, to communicate the full significance of that character, Karanth himself took up that role on the stage; and this is what he says regarding that role:

In between such episodes (featuring the prophets) is depicted the role of Kala (a symbol of Time). The job had to be done in a symbolic way. Music couldn't do it; prose couldn't do it. So I depicted it through dances. It (Time) creates a new age and destroys the old one. It flies like a bird, burns like fire and destroys the old. It rolls on and on, and only movements in dance could give this suggestion. (*Lekhanagalu*, 3 : 572)

Fortunately, photographs of Karanth's dance as Time (as 'Kaala Pakshi', 'Kaalaagni,' 'Thandava,' etc.) have survived; and they register the sheer energy and gusto that Karanth infused to that character.

*Mukta Dwara* is a sequence of episodes brought together with the character of Time. But *Kisa Gothami*, another successful opera, has a well-knit plot. Kisa Gothami, a young woman whose child is dead, comes to Buddha with a plea to bring back the child to life. Buddha asks her to get some sesame seeds from any home that is free from death. Kisa Gothami goes from one house to another and finds that there is no one who has not suffered from the death of someone dear to him/her - one has lost a sister, another her husband, and still another her parents. Finally, Kisa Gothami, returns to Buddha with the realisation that everyone/everything that is born has to die eventually. The play ends with these memorable lines of Buddha:

There's no place free from death, and free from  
pain;

Life and death are inseparably related; and you  
can't change it.

Don't grieve for one's death ;

And don't rejoice over one's birth.

You are crying for a dream - is it proper?

This sport of Death also is equally unreal.

Tell me, should you crave it? And should you  
grieve for it? (*Geetha Natakagalu*, pp. 10-11)

Lastly, we can consider *Yaaro Andaru* ('Somebody Said So!') as a fine example of comic opera. It resembles the outer play of Sheridans' *School For Scandal*. The play begins with

whispers heard from behind the curtain; and then groups of rumour-mongering people come on the stage one after another and indulge in gossip. They talk about the death of a woman called Surakka, and impute all sorts of motives for her death, such as rift between husband and wife, the wife's illicit relationship with another, the husband's affairs with another woman, etc. At the end of the play, we find both the husband and the supposedly-dead wife returning from her parental place, happily. Still the rumour-mongers are not fazed at all; they suspect something fishy between the husband and wife. For, they argue, there cannot be so much smoke without fire.

Unfortunately, Karanth did not give full musical notations to any of his operas; printed texts contain only the name of the raga (scale) in which a particular song is to be sung. Since an opera is both a visual and auditory art, we can not experience the impact of Karanth's operas today as their audiences experienced. We have to be content with recorded audience-experiences, of which the following is just one example;

When Karanth was engaged in staging *Mukta Dwara*, he felt suddenly that what he had planned for 'Kaala Nata' was not right; and the performance had been scheduled for the very next day. Hence, Karanth decided to take on the rôle himself; and, anklets tied round his ankles, he practiced his dances throughout the night. Even his dances were like him: less of professional knowledge and traditional skill, more of gusto, inspiration and innovation. Who else can equal Karanth in his moods and energy but Karanth himself? The kind of Karanth's dances in which

spontaneity and energy overshadow the technique, the discipline and the professional knowledge that one can learn from one's teacher, only Karanth can perform.\*

Yakshagana, the traditional music-dance-drama which is popular with both the learned and the laity in coastal Karnataka, was an art-form very close to Karanth's heart throughout his life. As he recalls in his autobiographies, he grew on Yakshagana as a boy; and, later, he spent years together to give a modern form – that of a ballet – to Yakshagana. It was his “life-time devotion, an art in which I involved much of my time and efforts, more than in any other activities.” (*Lekhanagalu* 3:575) He published book-length studies and any number of research articles on Yakshagana, both in Kannada and English.

Yakshagana is a very complex and composite form of theatre. Bhagavatha, the narrator-director of the entire performance, sings for himself (narrating the story) and for other characters. He sings to the accompaniment of certain percussion instruments like a drone, a mridanga and a ‘chande’ (a high-pitched drum). The characters dance according to the tune set by him and then indulge in improvised dialogue. Their make-up is very heavy and character-specific (as prescribed by tradition) and their costumes also are very colourful and striking. As prescribed by custom, female roles are played by men. Most of the Yakhsagana compositions are based on either the Ramayana or the Mahabharatha; and each performance, beginning at ten at night, continues till the break of dawn.

In short, the Yakshagana is a feast of colour, dance, music and drama; and it has sustained its appeal over

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\* V. Seetharamaiah, as quoted by M. Mallia, *Kinnaraloka*, p. 70.

centuries to scholars and illiterate alike. Karanth, as can be expected from a highly imaginative and innovative non-conformist, was both fascinated and depressed by the modern forms of Yakshagana. He always saw the tremendous possibilities of a ballet in Yakshagana, and he set about it with a single-minded devotion.

What Karanth did in transforming Yakshagana into a modern ballet was both a revival of its traditional aspects and modernisation. Through extensive research he established the traditional 'ragas', the costumes of the type-characters (such as kings, gods, demons, etc.) especially of the female characters, and stage-decor. Next, he cut down the songs assigned to the Bhagawatha, from about 400 to 100; and tried to link the words of the songs with suitable music. He completely did away with dialogue, and increased the role of music and dancing to do the job of dialogue. He added the violin, saxophone, and clarinet to the repertoire of traditional Yakshagana instruments, and importantly, attempted to link dance-rhythms and musical rhythms. Because of all these changes (especially there being no dialogue), the performance-time also came down from eight to three hours. Then, Karanth assembled a group of talented artists and personally trained them for months at a time. The result was a brilliant and new Yakshagana-ballet.

The first two Yakshagana-ballets that Karanth created were *Bheeshma Vijaya* and *Abhimanyu-Saindhava Vadhe* (The Victory of Bheeshma and the Deaths of Saindhava and Abhimanyu), both based on the Mahabharatha. The ballets were first presented in Mumbai in the middle of 1962, and they were a resounding success. They won unqualified critical acclaim from all the journalists, art-critics and

lovers of art, both Indian and Western. Enthused by this response, later Karanth took his troupes and gave performances in almost every major city in India, and other countries. What was only local and traditional till Karanth took over became an internationally known and respected art-form.

It is true that due to Karanth's genius and innovative spirit, Yakshagana-ballet today has earned national and international reputation. But there is another face to such an innovation. Karanth's Yakshagana is not amenable to those thousands of common people who throng to see a traditional Yakshagana. What was a popular art-form became the exclusive domain of the elite and sophisticated; and the divide between serious and popular forms of literature and arts entered, with Karanth, the field of Yakshagana also.

"Of all my activities, the one about which I am somewhat proud," Karanth confesses in one of his articles, "is what I have done in dances. ... In a way, my venture, discovery and creation of dance is all my own."\* *Lekhanagalu*, 3:609). This passionate love of dance led Karanth to compose and choreograph his own ballets besides Yakshagana-ballets. The illustrious dancer, Chandrabhaga Devi, recalls how, as a young girl of ten, she and her sisters had taken part in Karanth's ballets such as "Pathanga" (Butterfly), "Haavaadiganu, Haavu" (The Snake-charmer and the Snake) and "Megha-Mayura" (The cloud and the peacock). She recalls the way in which Karanth used to train her and her sisters, stressing the fact that they should dance "freely and spontaneously, without being tied down to any set framework." Her 'Snake dance,' composed and directed by Karanth, was

so captivating that (as she recalls) James H. Cousins honoured her with a special award, on December 11, 1935, at Calicut. She also recalls another ballet called "Sagara" (The Ocean) in which she took part, under Karanth's direction. (*Kinnaraloka*, pp.125-131) Dance was literally a life-long passion for Karanth.

## **B) TRAVELOGUES:**

It is a wellknown fact that writers and artists are given to wide travels. But, there must be very few writers who have travelled as widely and as often as Karanth. Karanth visited most of the major cities in the world, and certain parts in India more than once. As he confesses, his was always a restless spirit which drove him to new places, seeking new knowledge and experience. A brief look at his travelogues gives us an idea of the extensive travels that Karanth undertook.

He has written six travelogues of which the first one, *Abuvinda Baramakke* ('From Abu to Barama,' 1950), describes his travels from Mount Abu in Rajasthan to Barama in Assam, through Delhi, Agra, Kashi, and other north Indian cities. The next is his most famous travelogue, *Apoorva Paschima* ('The Non-east/Rare West,' 1954), describes his visit to European countries including England. *Paathalakke Payana* ('Journey to the Nether World,' 1973), his third travelogue, documents his experiences, in the U.S.A. *Poorvadinda Athyapoorvakke* ('From East to the Far East,' 1982) pictures his experiences in the Far eastern countries like Hong Kong and Japan. His fifth travelogue, *Arasikaralla* ('They are not Philistines,' 1987), is a record of his experiences in the then East Germany and Soviet Russia. He took a Yakshagana-ballet troupe with him to Russia, the Gulf countries and South America, in 1991; and

his experiences there are recorded in his last and sixth travelogue *Yaksharangakkaagi Pravasa* ('Travels For Yaksharanga,' 1992).

A discussion of travelogues in general involves two inter-related questions: why does one travel? and why do we read travelogues? Let us consider the first question, first.

People undertake travels, short and extended, for various reasons - for the sake of money, pleasure, adventure, or knowledge. Karanth's purpose in his travels was always the last one - knowledge or love of arts. "The purpose of what I sought (during my travels) was always definite," says Karanth in the introduction to his fourth travelogue, "where are the exquisite works of art and architecture situated in Europe? Which are the historical places? Where are the great pieces of sculpture and paintings?" Consequently, what we find in all of his travelogues are extensive - and knowledgeable - accounts of museums, Art Galleries, theatres, and music-halls. Not even by mistake does Karanth visit - and record for us - pleasure-spots or places of entertainment.

In fact, Karanth does not say much even on people he met and the political-cultural systems of the countries he visited. This attitude, it has to be mentioned, is a refreshing contrast to those who spend a few months in a particular country and then, deeming themselves experts, undertake to write 'authoritative' evaluation of that country and the people there. But Karanth has the humility to say:

It is impossible to understand and communicate to others the life lived by those people (of the countries visited) throughout their long history. ...  
I don't believe that just by travelling through a



country for a few weeks we can get to know them completely. ... Hence, I would like to inform my readers that I don't have any such illusion of having understood the people of the countries I have visited. My readers also needn't entertain such illusions.

(*Poorvadinda*, intro.7-8)

As a traveller, Karanth is always a learner, a student, and not an expert or a judge. "I went there to learn, not to teach," declares Karanth in his introduction to his travelogue on America.

This is the reason why Karanth has utter contempt for those Indians who go to other - mostly Western - countries only to blow the trumpet of Indian heritage and Indian spirituality. There are brief and pointed satirical portraits of many such Indian scholars who go abroad to spread the 'glory' of India, the character of Miniswamy in *Arasikaralla* being the most pointed. He is one who lies to his Russian guide in order to save a few roubles; and, yet, he poses wherever he goes as the sole inheritor of Indian spirituality. As we find in his novels also, if there is one human quality that Karanth abhors, it is hypocrisy; and he finds most of the Indian scholars and saints going or living abroad hypocrites. Even the titles of his travelogues are very meaningful; they militate against the drum-beaters of Indian Heritage: *Apoorva Paschima* means the West that is both non-East and distinguished; *Arasikaralla* means that the people of the so-called 'materialist' countries like Russia and East Germany are not philistines and that, on the contrary, they have great artists and they are informed lovers of art. The following is a typical dig at the jingoism of Indians:

"He (Miniswamy) had limitless pride in the greatness of Indian culture. 'Ours is a country of a culture that goes back to thousands of years; it is a country that revealed the light of Truth to the rest of the world. As opposed to this, your country and your people do not have any sense of culture or morality; yours is a life of uncultured brutes' - whenever I heard such words, I was taken aback. Should we come all the way here to give them this sermon? (*Arasikaralla*, p.142)

Now, to come to the second question as to why we read travelogues. Among the various reasons for our love of travelogues, the desire to know and understand what we have not seen or known till now and the opportunity to share (albeit vicariously) the excitement of meeting strangers and moving in distant countries seem to be most important. Karanth's travelogues satisfy both these demands.

Through Karanth's travelogues, we get acquainted with the great museums, art galleries and grand architecture of the world. The Natural History Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the National Museum at Stockholm, the Art Gallery of Hamburg, the Louvre of Paris - Karanth's elaborate descriptions of these and other similar legendary places are both informative and exciting. Karanth's account is so rich and full of admiration that it provokes the readers also to yearn to see those places. Through him, we come to know of the great painters and sculptors like Michael Angelo, Rembrandt, and Vangogh; the great musicians and dancers like Mozart and Madame Peluka; the ancient monuments like the Roman Colisium and the Cathedral of Notre Dame. We come to know in brief their history and their greatness, and how and why cities like Oslo, Berlin and Tokyo, which had been

reduced to ruins in the II World War, have risen again with greater splendour. And, at the end, we as readers are thankful to the writer for enabling us to see and know all these.

One inbuilt generic limitation of travelogues is that, unless the writer is extremely careful, they tend to become city-guides and brochures - list of places and things worth seeing. Karanth's travelogues, on most occasions, overcome this limitation. For one thing, Karanth's tone of narration is always gentle and friendly; he never takes on himself the role of either a know-all or a great philosopher. Secondly, he has a good sense of humour; and, often, he directs humour at himself - his age, his eccentricities, and his supposed lack of sophistication. For instance, he repeatedly tells his readers that his English carried heavy traces of his mothertongue; and hence his Western audiences may not always understand him. We see him always, wherever he goes, searching for vegetarian food and coffee. It appears that what he needs more than food is coffee, strong and hot. When he does not get it as in Moscow, he becomes miserable. In the context of the prompt and quick telephone service in America and the proverbial delay in such services in India, he has this comment to make; "Since they (Americans) believe only in this life, they do everything quickly. But we Indians, who have faith in rebirth, are never given to any hurry. Whatever we want to do in this life, we can wait for the next life to complete" (*Pathalakke*, p.48). Such humorous comments, which abound in these travelogues, keep the readers entertained as well as interested.

However, it has to be emphasised that the most characteristic as well as appealing feature of Karanth's travelogues is his deep concern for India and its people. Wherever he goes and whatever he sees, immediately he

compares it with its counterpart in India, and ruefully reflects on Indian conditions. Commenting on the professional ethics of British and European businessmen, Karanth writes:

What a world of difference between such reliability and the black-marketeering flourishing in India after the (Second World) War! In the case of medicines (in India) while the foreign label and bottle are copied, the contents are something different. Such industries which enjoy government-protection, do not pay heed to the quality and durability of their products ... Goods are there for the customers, not to make profit for the traders. ... When do we take these things seriously and ponder over them? (*Apoorva*, 83-84)

In another context, while describing the expertise, care, and attention devoted to Science and Art in such institutions as the Smithsonian Institute at Washington, D.C., Karanth observers ruefully: "Among the many huge projects of our country, there isn't a single project concerning cultural and archeological research. However, there is no dearth of experts amongst us who can indulge in loose talk for hours together" (*Paathalakke*, p.164).

In short, the abiding concern and commitment of Karanth the traveller as well as Karanth the man are effectively reflected in these words :

After I returned from the non-East West to my own Eastern India, my mind continued to provoke me with these questions; "Will your people ever resolve to emulate the adventurous spirit and love of culture seen in those people? Or, will they continue to babble as if they are the great spiritualists and that they have the

sole responsibility of saving the Western world from its materialistic slush?" I did not have the courage to answer such questions. (*Apoorva*, p.370).

In a monograph like this, there is no place for a discussion of all Karanth's works and practices. Hence, regretfully, I shall leave out a considerable body of his works - encyclopedias and dictionaries, autobiographies and biographies, and children's literature - and now turn to his discursive writings. Karanth's essays and articles / speeches on diverse subjects were collected in eight volumes by Ms. Malini Mallya and were published by Mangalore University during 1993 - 1996. In all, the eight volumes run to about 4000 pages; and contain Karanth's serious reflections on varied subjects, ranging from literature and literary criticism to education, arts and culture, and environment. As Viveka Rai says in his introduction to the first volume, "these articles / speeches document the way Karanth responded to contemporary issues over a period of eighty years. In fact, they give us an authentic picture of the nature of the vast changes that swept through Karnataka / India, through most part of the 20th century" (I :vii). In this section, I shall concentrate on Karanth's views on education, culture and arts, and environment.

(a) *Education* : Karanth was seriously interested and deeply involved in education, primary education in particular. He was a member of many Advisory Bodies, both regional and national; and he wrote and spoke extensively on the nature of primary education. What is to be recorded in particular is that Karanth practised what he preached. He established an ideal school for children (called 'Balavana' in Kannada) in Puttur; and ran it for a number of years during the early Forties of the last century. During the same period, he

conducted, annual children's Meets which would last for ten days. In this Meet, children would roam in nature, hold competitions in nursery rhymes and proverbs, and stage skits. He wrote as many as 23 booklets for children (each of 30-40 pages + pictures) and 120 Kannada adaptations of Amara Chitrakatha (I.B.H. Publications).

He also wrote a series of seven graded texts for the elementary schools; they were, meaningfully, called "Oduva Aata" - 'The Game of Reading.'

The principle behind all these works and practices of Karanth in the field of primary education was that 'learning should be a pleasurable activity for children, and not a punishment.' Hence, he abhorred any kind of systematic and regimented instruction at the primary level. He had no place for grammars and Moral Lessons in schools; and he wanted information-oriented books and teaching to be kept to the minimum. On the other hand, he wanted to provide opportunities for children to develop their inherent skills, and to get new information and experience making use of all of their five senses. On many occasions, he deplored that we cater, in our education system, only to one sense of our students - the eye. According to him, children in the early stages of education, should be able to see, hear, smell and touch different objects, birds and animals. They should be taught mostly through audio - visual equipment. In short, primary education should be such that pupils should love schooling instead of being either hateful or afraid of it. In one of his articles, he argues passionately :

Our schools should enable our children to develop their inborn creativity. It is not enough if they are provided

with certain tools; they should also be given enough freedom. Slaves cannot create anything. Can we compare the singing of a bird, flying freely in the sky, with that of another imprisoned in a cage? (II : 89)

Regarding the reading materials for school children, Karanth makes a very significant point that 'what interests adults need not necessarily interest children.' Hence, any book written for them should be grounded in child psychology; it should not merely impart some dry facts but should be such that it arouses their sense of wonder and curiosity about nature, animal and plant life, and people around them. Karanth is very critical of the use of dry and standardised language in children's books. He argues for the use of such a language which children hear in and outside their homes. He does not set much store by 'pure' or 'correct' form of language.

Even the vocabulary of such books, Karanth says, should be that with which children are familiar. Now-a-days, policy-makers believe that if they introduce every kind of serious issues in textbooks, their objectives are achieved. "A sense of morality," says Karanth, "can't be developed only by schools. I don't believe that the student, who is taught a few lessons in civics, becomes a good citizen. Morality and civic sense have to be imparted by the society in which the student lives" (II :21)

Regarding the place of English vis-a-vis the regional language, Karanth has very firm views. In his opinion, English should serve only as a 'link language' within and outside India. But, within a linguistic region, the regional language should be used for all administrative and legal purposes. He stresses time and again that primary and

secondary education should be imparted through the mother-tongue ; and he dislikes forcing children to study in 'English Medium Schools.' But, in this respect, he differs from the run-of-the - mill language-chauvinists. His insistence on the 'mother-tongue as the medium of instruction' extends to the minority-languages also within a state. He emphatically asserts that "speakers of Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, etc., within Karnataka should be able to educate their children, at the primary and secondary level, in their own mother-tongues. The government should give an unequivocal assurance to that effect to all the minorities within the State" (II : 36-37). Similarly, Karanth does not accept the three-language formula; and he advocates - like Kuvempu (Dr. K.V. Puttappa, the first Jnyanapitha Awardee in Kannada) - a two-language formula; the state language / mother-tongue and English. If one wants to study a third language at the college / university level, one should be free to choose any language including Sanskrit and Latin.

Unfortunately, Karanth's views on the different aspects of education have continued to fall on deaf ears till today.

*(b) Culture and Arts :*

To Karanth, culture is a very inclusive concept : it is the sum total of both achievements in the fields of literature, fine arts, and philosophy, and the food and dress habits, forms of entertainment, rites and rituals, beliefs, and the view of life of a particular community. Hence it is, Karanth points out, that culture bestows a distinctive identity on a particular community.

Further, according to Karanth, every human society possesses a distinctive culture of which it is proud. On no ground can the culture of one society be viewed as inferior



or superior to that of another. All that can be said is that they are 'different.' Karanth often ridicules those Indian politicians, writers, and monks, who go to Western countries only to sing paeans of 'the glorious Indian culture.' What matters is how much of that 'glorious culture' has actually been translated into one's daily life.

Karanth always upholds the multi-cultural form of Indian society. In fact, he is very doubtful of the category called 'Indian culture.' There are many diverse cultures in India, and one cannot afford to privilege any one culture as 'the Indian culture.' He says :

How is it possible to talk of 'Indian culture' as if it refers to a monolithic object? .....Our scholars say 'this is Aryan culture.' But do they realise what transformations this 'Aryan culture' has undergone after reaching India ? ...

Indian culture today is so varied as to be called 'cultures.' The roots of this culture go back to ancient times; and it has developed through contact with many races and peoples. Hence, among its many ingredients, it is impossible to say surely what is native and what is alien, what is borrowed out of love and what has been imposed upon by force. If we view Indian culture thus, we realise that there is no place for chauvinism. (II : 287 - 288)

At the other extreme, ruefully Karanth points out, there is a tendency among upper-class, urban Indians to look down upon anything Indian. They are happy to ape the West in all fields - Literature, Theatre, Music and Dance. Consequent to such Western cultural hegemony, there is a genuine fear that

we may lose our distinctive identity, together with whatever has been enriched and preserved for centuries, in arts, architecture and folklore. Western culture made an impact on Indian society in the past because it was backed by Colonial power. But now, after independence, there is no reason to continue our cultural enslavement. On one occasion, he comments in anguish :

Due to such a situation (of the colonial mindset), people in our country admire and imitate any junk that comes from the West. These Western cultures are mixed with our culture in such a bewildering fashion that we are unable to recognise our own souls. Such craze for Western commodities may one day sound the death-knell of native traditions and products. What is called National Renaissance cannot be measured in terms of rupees and paise (II : 268).

In his concern for native culture and traditions, Karanth comes very close to the celebrated post-colonial thinker, Frantz Fanon, and his arguments in *Black Skins White Masks*. In the context of cultural hegemony and the colonial hangover from which we are yet to recover, Karanth passionately questions the kind of Indian histories taught in schools and college:

Do we still need such textbooks, which distort our history? Shivaji - a thief; Aurangzeb - a sinner; Tippu - a sadist; but Clive - a gentleman ; Warren Hastings - a nobleman; Wellesley - a cultured person; - let's not have such lessons for our children. .... Let's not continue the refrain that our people were barbaric cannibals and that the kind British arrived here and saved us. (II : 101)

It is such a view of Karanth, a fine and informed balance between unqualified admiration of the West and undue nativistic jingoism that makes his works - both fictional and discursive - very relevant even today.

Moving on to his view of arts in the modern world, interestingly, Karanth reminds us of the British Formalists like Richards and Empson and American New Critics. According to Karanth (and to the Formalists and New Critics) Arts give a form and pattern to those experiences and phenomena which, in real life, are formless and chaotic. To quote Karanth:

Many experiences and phenomena 'do not appear meaningful when they are found in real life. But, at the time of artistic creation, each (experience / phenomenon) subsumes all others and results in a meaningful work of art. The songs one sings, the puppets one makes, the dances one performs, the poetry one composes - all these are organic and imaginative constructs of the incidents and phenomena that are meaningless and disorganised in real life (II : 261 - 262).

However, regarding the act of creation, Karanth is different from the New Critics; and holds what can loosely be called a 'Romantic' view. He contends, in his creative as well as critical writings, that Indian tradition in arts does not give much freedom for the artist. His oft-repeated stand is that technical virtuosity and professional competence do not make for great art; and he lays great store on innovation and originality. Commenting on the idols of Buddha at Sarnath and Anuradhapura, Kangra-style painting, and the music of Thyagaraja and Purandara Dasa, Karanth declares :

In them we don't find anything of conscious pedantry or glaring technical virtuosity. If we go back to the seals and figurines of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, we become aware of an even simpler mind and feelings; we become aware of an artist, who, almost involuntarily, gives a shape to his feelings under the pressure of creativity (II : 45).

In another article, Karanth asserts that a work of art should come into being, as naturally as flowers on a plant. A plant puts forth flowers because it cannot help doing so ; and so should an artist (II :25).

It is true that mere scholarship or competence does not result in a great work of art. But, Karanth never accepts the fact that mere 'genius' also (which is also a debatable term) does not lead to a great work of art. Ancient Sanskrit aestheticians valued as much erudition in one's field (called 'vyuthpaththi' in Sanskrit) as genius or inborn creativity (called 'prathibha' in Sanskrit). It can be argued that behind a Saranath - Buddha or Thyagaraja's music, there lie traditional knowledge and experience accumulated through centuries. However, Karanth, who always stood for artistic freedom and innovation, never accepted the role of traditional competence in the field of art.

### **(C) ENVIRONMENT :**

That India after independence opted for industrialisation on a massive scale, and that the then-prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, considered 'huge reservoirs such as Bhakra-Nangal the temples of modern India' is history now.

India wanted to achieve the level of industrialisation in a few decades what the Western nations had achieved in a few centuries. In such a hurry for modernisation, in the first few decades after independence, nobody in India thought of the cost of modernisation in terms of deforestation, urbanisation, and depletion of natural resources. However, when industrialisation reached alarming proportions and nuclear power also entered the field in the Eighties, people began to question the very concepts of progress and modernity. Among such people who raised their voice against blind exploitation of natural resources and unqualified use of nuclear power, Karanth, was one of the active and influential.

Being born and brought up in the neighbourhood of the Western Ghats, Karanth had an innate love for the woodlands and the varied forms of flora and fauna found there. Also, being the writer of a Science Encyclopedia in Kannada (called *Vigyana Prapancha*), he possessed technical knowledge about nuclear energy, huge power-plants and massive dams. When, in the 80's, such mega projects as the Kaiga Nuclear Project, Kudremukh Iron ore Project, Bedti Project, etc., entered coastal Karnataka, Karanth undertook the most demanding exercise in his age, of educating people through scores of articles and public addresses. He lent support to most of the organisations interested in environmental protection; and toured many parts of Karnataka and other states to create public awareness. He even filed a P.I.L. in the Supreme Court against Kaiga Project. "I know my limits. Even so I have been active in the work of environmental conservation. This is a cause for which I would not stint anything," writes Karanth in his (translated) autobiography (*Ten*, p.282).

Karant's opposition to the use of nuclear energy and mega industries is both philosophical and practical. Philosophically, Karant opposes blind exploitation of nature and natural resources on the ground that the entire universe is not created only to be exploited by Man. To quote Karant:

We have to bear in mind that not only Man, even insects and worms have a right to live in this world. Is the whole world ours ? Don't other forms of life have a right here? Even to digest the food we eat, we need bacteria. Environment is such that every form of life is related to others. Unless we have plenty of trees and plants, we don't get enough oxygen to breathe. .... Environment means the air we breathe, the water we drink. Wisdom tells us to live without destroying such environment. Once we destroy it, there is nothing we can do; neither do we live nor other forms of life. (VII. 310-311)

What Karant preached and practised throughout the last two decades of the 20th century was that 'we, human beings, are not the inheritors of this world; we are only its custodians and hence have the sacred responsibility of passing it on, without undue damage to it, to the future generations.'

Secondly, Karant opposed nuclear plants and mega industries because the harm resulting from them, in terms of money, natural resources, and human suffering, was too high a price to pay for development. For example - Karant gives facts and figures in many of his articles - the Harihar Polyfibre Industry used up, during 1983 - 84, 59,025 tonnes of wood; and the government of Karnataka handed over to it about

70,000 hectares of agricultural land. Also, the affluents of the factory, being released to the river, have polluted the river for miles together. Similarly, the Kudremukh Iron Ore Company has not only denuded vast tracts of virgin forests but also has totally polluted the Thunga river, making its water unfit to drink. Added to these, wherever a huge industry comes up, thousands of families lose their home and hearth and are uprooted. Despite all initial promises, finally neither the owners of the industry nor the concerned governments come to the aid of such displaced families. To profit a handful of people, many - mostly tribals and peasants - suffer horribly. Is this progress? - asks Karanth .

Karanth is unequivocal about nuclear energy. "We don't want nuclear weapons at all," says Karanth, "If mankind has to survive in this world, first, we have to put an end to Nuclear Reactors and Plants" (VII : 238). He discusses in detail the Three-Mile-Island disaster in the United States, the Chernobyl tragedy in Russia, etc., and argues that Nuclear energy is always a potential disaster because, till today, nobody knows what to do with 'atomic waste' of the Reactors. Having filed a P.I.L. against the Kaiga Nuclear Plant, he warns : " Kaiga is not just a powerhouse. It is a veritable genie" (Ten, p.284).

What adds to Karanth's righteous anger in this connection is the secretive nature and hypocrisy of Indian Nuclear Scientists. That the Dhruva Reactor in Bombay ran without any coolant for one year came to light only in 1992. In a station in Rajasthan, the lid of a heavy-water container developed a crack which could not be sealed for five years. Despite such mishaps, Indian scientists not only hid those facts from the public but also declared hypocritically that "Gamma

rays caused no harm" and that "we have appointed a committee" to look into these matters. Karanth exclaims indignantly : "Such is the strict secrecy maintained about all nuclear disasters in India. What a criminal act?" (VII : 359).

It goes without saying that Karanth was not always successful in his attempts to conserve environment and stall Nuclear Plants. Despite strong opposition under his leadership, the Kaiga Nuclear Plant did come into existence. But Karanth was successful in forcing the Karnataka Government to abandon its proposed Bedthi Project, Cogentrics, Nagarjuna, and many other potentially disastrous and hastily concluded projects. More than all, through his extensive tours, speeches, and writings, he created an awareness among people on ecology and environment. He was instrumental in the formation of many Citizens' Forums to fight for the cause of environment and displaced people. Such Forums are active today in Karnataka, which is a tribute to Karanth's personal and moral leadership.

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## CHAPTER V

### SUMMING UP

It is not easy to sum up the many-faceted output of a man like Shivarama Karanth, whose career spanned eight decades of a tumultuous century. His output was voluminous and he was very complex in his intellectual make-up. Consequently, whatever generalisation one comes up with, one is forced, immediately, to make certain qualifications. Bearing this caution in mind, what I propose to do in this short chapter is two-fold : to elaborate the philosophical assumptions that underlie Karanth's works, and to draw certain parallels between him and other writers - Indian and Western.

Analysing Indian (mainly Hindu) responses to colonialism, Bhikku Parekh categorises the responses under four heads : Traditionalism, Modernism, Critical Traditionalism and Critical Modernism.\* Despite the fact that categories can never be hard and fast, these categories of Bhikku Parekh are useful as starting points. In such categorisation, Shivarama Karanth can be identified as a 'Critical Modernist.'

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\**Colonialism, Tradition and Reform : An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*. New Delhi : Sage Publications, 1989 : p.34.

As has been well-documented by many, 'Modernism' entered India through English education. It was the Enlightenment view of Modernism, characterised by Liberal Humanism, Rationalism, Belief in Natural Law, Faith in Scientific Progress, a Linear view of History moving inexorably toward progress, etc. The Imperial Power introduced secular English education in India (as has been convincingly argued by Gauri Vishwanathan\*), primarily to strengthen and perpetuate its hold on the subject nation. However, no culture, more so the Indian culture with a history of two thousand years at least, accepts the hegemony of an alien culture without any qualms. The subject culture attempts to assert itself and demonstrate its superiority over the alien culture. Inevitably, such a dual movement leads to all sorts of conflicts and contradictions; and the sensitive individual wanders perpetually between enthusiastic acceptance of the cultural hegemony of the ruling power, and fierce assertion of his past, with a revival of ancient cultural forms. Most of the Indian political leaders and writers of late 19th century and early twentieth century betray such contrary pulls and contradiction. Karanth was no exception : while, on the one hand, he warmly welcomed Modernity and swore by Science, on the other hand, he deplored and fought against colonial cultural hegemony. He was, like many of his contemporaries, both modern and traditional, both progressive and conservative.

Why does a society accept alien culture ? Edward Said has offered one explanation through his now-famous concept of Orientalism - a kind of discourse steadily built up by the colonising power in order to perpetuate the authority over the

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\* *Masks of Conquest -: Literary Study and British Rule in India.*  
London : Faber & Faber, 1989

subject nation. But, there could be other explanations, arguably more subtle and nearer to truth. Commenting on Gramsci's theory Strinati suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, not because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but *because they have reasons of their own.*"\* (my emphasis) In short, the Indian society in the 19th century accepted and welcomed modernity and the cultural hegemony of the coloniser, because it had reasons of its own. Karanth's novels, plays and discursive writings very sensitively document what "the reasons of its own" were.

Karanth whole-heartedly concurred with the colonial equation of 'English education = Modernity = Progress' because such an equation allowed him to successfully combat the traditional Hindu society, stagnant for centuries and marked by heartless caste-system and patriarchy. In one of his early discursive works *Baalveye Belaku* (1945 ; 'Life is Light'), he mounts a virulent attack on established religions and customs, on the strength of modern Science. On many occasions Karanth described himself, as a 'non-theist'; and he viewed religions as inimical to an individual's development. The most important theses in this work are :

- a) God cannot transcend our (human) limitations; and
- b) Life is for living.

Karanth argues that all gods are Man's creations, and hence they have the same limitations as men. More importantly, we should be worried not about God's existence

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\* Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London : Routledge, 1995 ; p. 166.

or non-existence but about our lives. "Greater the life, greater the God. Hence, Life is more important than God" (p.42). According to Karanth, the greatest contribution of Buddhism to Indian society was its instruction to face life without bothering about whether or not God exists. Karanth notes that almost all major religions view this life and 'Here' with suspicion and that they harp upon the 'other world' and 'Hereafter.' But, 'this life' can neither be insignificant nor futile. In one of his interviews conducted when he was 91, he clarifies his position : "... this life is all that we have to live and to learn from. I am not saying that God doesn't exist; just that I have not been able to tell myself that He exists." (*Lekhanagalu*, 4:514). From this point of view, he is different from another major and radical writer of the 20th century, Kuvempu (Dr. K.V. Puttappa). Though Kuvempu was equally rebellious regarding Orthodox Hindu religion and customs, he had total faith in Advaita philosophy as propounded by Swami Vivekananda.

Because of his insistence on living life in this world fully despite its concomitant sorrow and hardship, Karanth has a consistent dislike for monks and 'holy men'; and he satirises them in all of his works. In his view, those who renounce life are the ones who really run away from their responsibilities in life. Also, since they happen to be men of flesh and blood, they cannot completely free themselves from worldly pleasures; hence, they tend to lead a hypocritical life. Hypocrisy is one quality that Karanth abhors. As contrasted with such ochre-robed 'holy men', Karanth has great and unqualified admiration as well as respect for the old women (who abound in his novels), who struggle throughout to make the lives of others a bit more comfortable. These women (like

Sarasoti and Paroti in *Marali Mannige* ) have very strong religious convictions; still, Karanth respects them because they accept all the challenges of life and boldly face them.

It is in this context of Karanth's reverence for life and living that we have to understand his formulation of 'runa' or 'indebtedness.' As he himself confesses, this is an idea that remained with him throughout his life. In his personal life, as his associates recall, he was scrupulous to a fault in settling everyone's accounts. He did not want to be 'indebted' to anyone, at least in money-matters. In most of his writings, he extends this idea of 'indebtedness' to cover the individual's relationship to his society. All of us owe much to our society; and we have an obligation to repay that debt. The protagonist of his famous novel *Alida Mele* ('After One's Death') makes this point very clear : "Life attains meaning only when, at the end of the road, one is able to say to oneself that one has given society more than what he received from it."

As a novelist, Karanth inherited the Reformist Novel or the Novel of Purpose, and he wrote, in the beginning, similar Reformist novels that dwelt on the evils of orthodox Hindu society. But, very soon, he got tired of such novels of purpose. He explains this shift in his stance to a question of Ananthamurthy - another great writer and admirer of Karanth - in these words :

In the beginning, my attitude was that of a social reformer. ... My aim, then, was destruction - a sort of 'not this, not this, not this.' ... But later I began to look for another more standing value - a value that can make life more interesting and beautiful. If everything

is destructible, why should we live ? There must be something - some faith, some joy - which makes one persist with life. I want to explore that.  
(*Lekhanagalu*, 4 : 399)

Most of Karanth's great novels like *Marali Mannige*, *Bettada Jeeva*, and *Mai Managala Suliyalli* explore such life-sustaining values.

Karanth's especial forte lies in his sensitive grasp and successful portrayal of the vast changes that swept through the Indian society during the colonial period. The characteristic novels of Karanth are sagas, which document the lives of three to four generations. With astonishing vividness, authentic details, and acute sensitivity, these sagas register the varied forms of conflicts as well as compromises between tradition and modernity that characterised modern Indian society during the colonial period. These sagas document the exhilaration, anguish and inaction of those people that were caught up in the very epicentre of the swirling waters of change. They record the very rhythm and pace of the vast upheaval that took place in the Indian society due to colonial impact : English, the language of the rulers, takes the place of Sanskrit and Arabic / Persian as the language of knowledge and power; joint families get broken and the continuity between generations, maintained for centuries, gets disrupted; villages as self-contained units of the society give place to crowded and unplanned cities; traditional occupations give place to newer professions; and classical arts are relegated to the background by the new forms of entertainment like the radio and cinema. In short, Karanth's sagas document with amazing objectivity, as no history or sociological study can, the socio-politico-cultural history of the colonial Indian society.

As sensitive social histories, Karanth's sagas can profitably be compared with Bibhuti Bhushan Bannerji's *Pather Panchali* (immortalised in the film medium by Sathyajit Ray) and Chinua Achebe's African Trilogy. The characters of Rama (*Marali Mannige*), Apu (*Pather Panchali*), and Obi Okonko (*No Longer At Ease*) are strikingly similar.\* Chinua Achebe, Bibhuti Bhushan Bannerji and Shivarama Karanth register, sensitively and forcefully, the colonial confrontation and its impact on a traditional society jolted by modern ideas and institutions. However, one notices a marked difference in stance between Indian and African writers. Chinua Achebe views the colonial discourse with greater suspicion than Indian writers, and Achebe has more reverence for traditional institutions and values than his Indian counterparts. The reason for this difference could lie in the Indian social organisation based on age-old and exploitative caste system which did not exist in Africa. Hence, the same 'modernity' imposed by colonialism, which appears to Achebe and other African writers as unmitigated Evil appears to most of the Indian writers (with a few qualifications) as a doorway to freedom and egalitarianism.

Whereas Karanth appears a radical rebel in matters pertaining to religion, morality, and sex, he appears to be highly conservative and traditional in politico-economic matters. Karanth has no faith in the democratic system as it is practised today in India though he has faith in Democracy as such. His political novels register the total failure of the democratic system because of illiterate voters, corrupt politicians, and self-centred bureaucrats. Also, he detests such

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\* T.P. Ashoka, *Shivarama Karanthara Kadambarigalalli Adhunikanada Prakriye*. Puttur : Karnataka Sangha, 1990.

'Socialistic' practices like Land-redistribution and the policy of Reservation for the downtrodden. Similarly, he has no sympathy for any shade of Leftist ideology; and communists as well as Trade-union leaders are always selfish and heartless villains in his works. Many critics have expressed their difficulty in explaining such a seemingly self-contradiction in Karanth.\*

However, I would like to argue that both the radical and conservative aspects of Karanth spring from the same ideology - that of unqualified Individualism.

One of the major intellectual ideals that reached the Indian intelligentsia through English / modern education was that of individualism. It was during the Renaissance period that Individualism took roots in Europe; and during the 18th century it grew to be a major philosophy of life. Individualism upholds the absolute rights of an individual in a society and does not respect any law or custom that tends to curtail those rights. Such a philosophy sets up the individual in opposition to society, traditions and customs in every field. Karanth was a champion of Individualism and hence his sustained attack on traditional religious-moral-literary precepts and institutions. In fact, Karanth argues that "it is the duty of the society to allow an individual to develop and retain his distinctive identity" (*Baalveye Belaku*, p. 126). He rebels against religions and religious institutions because they circumscribe one's individuality. It is for the same reason that he has no sympathy for Trade-union Movements and Socialist legislation. However, it has to be accepted that despite his personal honesty and integrity, and despite his

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\* For example, G. Rajashekhara. See his articles in *Karantha Manthana*.



strong sense of puritan work ethics, Karanth failed to realise that Individualism, if upheld as a sacrosanct principle, can in practice turn out to be another form of tyrannical capitalism. There is no way one can justifiably impose the Liberal philosophy, which developed in an industrialised and highly prosperous West, on the Indian society marked by heartless extremes in terms of wealth, education, and social position. Sadly, Karanth was never ready to accept this harsh truth.

More importantly, in his socio-political views, Karanth contradicts and opposes what he shows as an artist. It was the same Karanth that related Choma's misery and suffering to his not owning a piece of land in *Chomana Dudi*; and it was the same Karanth who exposed the utter cruelty underlying a feudalistic society in works like *Dharmarayana Samsara* and *Kudiyara Koosu*. Unfortunately, Karanth never consciously realised such a rift in him between the individual and the artist.

Perhaps Karanth and his contemporaries are too close to the post-independence Indian society to evaluate it objectively. Maybe, the writers and historians after a few centuries will not find the present politico-economic system of India as hopeless and doomed as Karanth and other Kannada writers find it today. As a matter of fact, writers in all transitional societies have viewed contemporary situation with despair. Writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift saw only political, cultural and moral decay in Augustan England. They firmly believed (as *The Dunciad* and *Gulliver's Travels* show) that England was inexorably moving towards anarchy and disintegration. In fact, at the end of the *Dunciad*, Pope describes Darkness descending on earth and enveloping everything in its fold:

Lo! thy dread empire, CHAOS, is restored;  
Light dies before thy uncreating word :  
Thy hand, great anarch, lets the curtain fall;  
And universal darkness buries all.

Transitional societies have always baffled writers; and Indian society in the 20th century was undergoing drastic changes in a breath-taking pace. Perhaps, we are too near the turbulent society to read it correctly.

We find a similar problem in Karanth's views on Art and creativity. To Karanth, Indian Art, be it poetry or music or dance, is highly conventional and traditional ; and there is no freedom for an artist in this tradition. Mere virtuosity or technical competence, Karanth maintains, does not constitute great art. An artist, according to him, should be an innovator and should devise his own new forms of expression and communication.

In such constant tirade against orthodoxy and conventionality in artistic expression, Karanth does not take into account the self-contradiction involved in his philosophy of art; and this is true as much of Karanth as Wordsworth and other Romantic artists. The myths of Ramayana and Radha-Krishna are indeed very old and conventional. But, like archetypes, they easily communicate the particular art - experience to the common people. If an artist abandons them as old and conventional, he has to create a new set of symbols and metaphors; and such new and personal symbols and metaphors may not be easily intelligible to the common people. Consequently, the work of art ends up becoming the domain of the very few elite connoisseurs. Then, what about Karanth's (or Wordsworth's) credo of taking art to

the common man? As the novel *Moga Padedu Mana* depicts, audiences do not respond as fully and whole-heartedly to Vyasa's original composition ('The Union with the Ocean') as to the representations of the myth of Radha and Krishna; and they cannot be totally blamed for this situation. As a matter of fact, the problem that every great artist / writer has to solve for himself is this : how to retain one's originality and still reach out to the masses ? Karanth gives different answers to this question on different occasions. If, sometimes, he feels that the public taste has to be corrected and that it can be corrected, on some other occasions he despairs of improving public taste. A true artist, he feels, has to be content with the joy he gets out of successful expression; and stoically accept the fact that he is always a 'lone voice.'

In this context, it is very interesting to compare Karanth's views of art with those of James Joyce and Eliot. Whereas Karanth's metaphor for pure art is "the peacock dance during rains" ('Mayura Nrithya'), that of Joyce is "forging in a smithy" (*The Portrait of An Artist*). While the former metaphor emphasises spontaneity and gay abandon, the latter emphasises traditional skill and craftsmanship. To Stephen Dedalus (in *The Portrait*) and to Eliot, progress of an artist is a continual extinction of one's personality; to Vyasa (in *Moga Padedu Mana*), it is freedom from tradition and total development of one's individuality. Joyce, coming 100 years after the great Romantic Movement and centuries of democracy, sets much store in an artist on competence, tradition, and balance. Karanth, coming from a highly traditional and recently democratic society, emphasises artistic freedom, originality, and fully realised individuality. Joyce's artist "like the God of creation, remains within or

behind or beyond or above his handiwork .... paring his fingernails" (*The Portrait*, p. 215). In other words, to use Maurice Beebe's nomenclature, Joyce's artist lives in the "Ivory Tower." But Karanth's artist is in the thick of the heat and dust, the struggle and pathos of human life. He belongs to the "Sacred Fount" tradition.

Karanth passionately loves his country and its achievements in the fields of Art and Literature. But the country he loved and enriched through his own contributions was a country of diverse religions, cultures, and languages. Karanth strove hard throughout his life to document and communicate the pluralistic nature of Indian society. In one of his famous articles ('The Silent History of Karnataka'), he writes thus on Indian culture :

After the ages of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, Dravidians entered this country, followed by the Aryans. In the succeeding centuries different races like the Greeks, the Parthians, the Shakas and Hunas, the Mongols and Turks, the Arabs ... continued to arrive in India. They came from the North-west of the country and also through the Western coast. Before they settled down in India, these races must have fought with the earlier settlers and later must have developed blood-relationship with them. Similarly, those who had settled here migrated to other parts of the world, and got mixed again with the local people there. Consequently, what we see today is that there is no race or community in India which can be called 'pure' or 'original.'

(*Lekhangalu*, 2:332 - 33)

Later, in the same article Karanth establishes evidence and argues that in the long history of India centres of Vedic learning have given place Buddhist Viharas and Stupas, which, in turn, have been converted into Vaishnava / Shaiva temples. Likewise, followers of Vedic religion have been converted into Buddhism; Buddhists have been converted into Jainism/ Vaishnavism / Shaivism; and Vaishnavites and Shaivites have been continually converting and reconverting from each other. "In fact, Indian culture today," contends Karanth, "is so diverse and varied as to be called 'cultures.' " (*Lekhanagalu*, 2 : 287)

Karanth was as rebellious and as full of life as the ocean which is a recurring metaphor in his works. Whereas during the first part of his life he continuously fought against traditional inequalities and meaningless practices, he fought against blind and destructive political policies in his later life. In short, slightly changing his words (at the end of the novel *Alida Mele*), it can surely be said of Karanth that he gave back his society more, much more than what he received from society.

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### **MAJOR HONOURS AND AWARDS:**

1. President, All India Kannada Conference : 1954
2. La Archives La International, Stockholm : 1958
3. Sahitya Akademi Award (for Yakshagana Bayalata) : 1959
4. Padma Bhushana Award, Govt. of India, 1968. (Karanth returned the Award as a protest against the imposition of Emergency in 1975).
5. Honorary Fellowship, Academy of Music and Drama: 1973
6. Jnanapith Award : 1978
7. Japanese Dance Critics Society Award (for Yakshagana performance directed by Karanth) : 1981
8. Honorary Fellowship, Sahitya Akademi : 1985
9. Thulasi Sanman, Govt. of Madhya Pradesh : 1990
10. Pampa Prashasti, Govt. of Karnataka : 1992  
(Highest literary Award given for a Kannada writer)
11. Honorary Membership, Lions International : 1996
12. D. Litt. (Honoris Causa) by Karnatak University : 1962; Mysore University : 1962; Meerut University : 1963; Mangalore University : 1983; Jabbalpur University : 1983; World Academy of Art and Culture : 1986; Vishwa Bharati University : 1997; and by Kannada University, Hampi: 1997.

(As listed by Ms. Malini Mallya, in *Shivarama Karanthara Krithi Kaipidi*, 1997)

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ii) I have followed the exhaustive Bibliography, compiled by Ms. Malini Mallya : *Shivarama Karanthara Krithi Kaipidi*, 1997.

**TRANSLATIONS OF KARANTH'S WORKS IN  
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1. Alida Mele : Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam
2. Balveye Belaku : English
3. Bettada Jiva : Hindi, Marathi
4. Chomana Dudi : Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu, English, Tulu,  
Oriya, Marathi, Konkani
5. Huchchu Manassina Haththu Mukhagalu : Malayalam,  
Marathi, English,
6. Kudiyara Kusu : Hindi, English, Spanish
7. Mai Managala Suliyalli : Hindi , Marathi
8. Marali Mannige : English, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali,  
Marathi, Gujarathi, Telugu, Maithili, Punjabi, Konkani.
9. Mookajjiya Kanasugalu : English, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil,  
Oriya, Malayalam
10. Sarasammana Samadhi : English
11. Yakshagana : Hindi

(As compiled by Ms. Malini Mallya, *Shivarama Karanthara Krithi Kaipidi*, 1997)

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